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# In the Court of the Rising Sun:

## My Journeys from the Midwest to the Far East

## By Don MacLaren

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## About the author

## Author’s note

This book is a non-fiction memoir, but I have made some changes to names, dates, places, and situations.

I have constructed this book – including dialogue – from notes and recordings I took while the events described in it took place, from legal documents, from published articles, books and films, and from memory. I have done my best to give an honest rendering of all that is contained herein. However, as individuals often have different interpretations of events, what I have chosen to describe may be different from what others who have gone through the same events might describe.

Some of the material in this book has been published previously (in altered form) under my name in *Wilderness House Literary Review* and *The Write Place At the Write Time* literary journal. Also, I have described or alluded to some of it in *Business Week* (International), the *Japan Times*, the *Mainichi Daily News* and *Time*.

## A note on Japanese pronunciation

1. The following examples are the American English equivalents of pronunciation of Japanese vowels. [1]

**The “a” is pronounced like “ah” sound in English, like the letter “a” in the English word “father.”**

**The “e” sound is pronounced like the “e” sound in the English word “pet.”**

**The “I” sound is pronounced like the “ee” sound in the English word “feet.”**

**The “o” sound is pronounced like the “oh” sound in the English word “no.”**

**The “u” sound is pronounced like the “oo” sound in the English word “food.”**

2. All Japanese syllables are pronounced with the same length and stress.

3. Diphthongs (sounds that constitute one syllable when two vowels are next to each other in a word) do not exist in Japanese. If two vowels are next to each other in a Japanese word, they constitute two syllables.

However, if a “u” follows an “o” in Japanese that constitutes an “o” sound that is twice as long as normal (with no “u” sound). Example: “*shachou*” (which means president of a company) has an “o” sound twice as long as a normal syllable, and has no “u” sound at the end.

4. Once one masters the pronunciation of vowels in Japanese the rest of Japanese pronunciation is relatively easy (compared to English pronunciation anyway). The consonants in Japanese are pretty much equivalent to English consonants. The “*sh*” sound in Japanese is the same as the English, so is the “*ch*,” etc. More detailed information on Japanese pronunciation can easily be found on the Internet.

However the “*h*” particle/preposition in the participle “*ha*” in Japanese is pronounced as a “w” would be in English. “*Ha*” is normally used after the subject of a sentence (though other particles are used after the subject too, depending on the context). Thus, “*ha*” would sound like “wa” to a native English speaker’s ears.

5. For your reference, I have included a glossary at the back of this book, written in “*roumaji*”[2] (“Romanization” – the English alphabet) of most of the Japanese words included in the text of this book. However, Japanese words included in the text of the book are sometimes defined within the text, but not in the glossary.

[1] After reading the pronunciation guide for Japanese vowels, you should be able to glean that the Anglicization of some Japanese words like “*karaoke*” and “*sake*” does not resemble the Japanese pronunciation.

[2] Sometimes spelled “*romaji*” when transliterated into English, but pronounced in Japanese with a long “o” in the first syllable (thus there is the “u” following the “o” above, in “*roumaji*” in “5.”).

## A note on Japanese names

Japanese names (as well as Chinese and Korean) begin with the family name. Thus, the given name is the “last name” in Japanese – which is the opposite of English names. For example, the Japanese writer known as “Yukio Mishima” in English is “Mishima Yukio” in Japanese.

Because most material published in English renders Japanese names with the given name first and family name last (as would be the case with an English name), I have chosen to incorporate that rendering in this book.

## Preface

12 February 1982

The *USS Coral Sea* approaches the port of Sasebo, Nagasaki Prefecture. I'm manning the rail, and as we near land, we're greeted with small boats that approach our ship. I see signs being held aloft from the boats. *Oh, here we go again,* I think to myself. *More people who hate us, just like in San Francisco and Berkeley. I guess they have a good reason though, because we nuked them.*

We get closer and I figure, *Well*, *at least I'm going on leave, so I don't have to spend time in this port city. They probably don't hate us as much in Tokyo, where I'm headed – alone, away from the Navy.*

I begin to hear yells from the people on the boats, and I think of the movie *The Sand Pebbles*, which takes place on the Yangtze River. In one scene, Chinese approach the *USS San Pablo* in small boats and try to attack it before it pulls away from them.

Then the signs in front of me in Sasebo begin to come into focus and I make out, written in English: "We Love You, US Navy." The people in the boats are yelling the same thing.

*The yells weren't from anger at all!* I tell myself. *We nuked them and yet they love us. They forgive us. They must be a beautiful people.*

I begin to feel overcome with emotion, and it is the only time in the Navy when tears fill my eyes.

* * *

Tears were to fill my eyes in Japan years later as well, when I was falsely accused of a crime and sued by the Japanese trading company I was working for – a company that imported products from some of the biggest companies in the United States and sold them to companies like Toyota and Nissan, as well as the Japanese government.

But that is only part of the story. What follows is the rest.

# Book I

## Part I: Beginnings

### 1. Midwestern roots

I lived mostly in Western Michigan until I was 19, in the small, conservative city of Grand Rapids. [1] Grand Rapids was also the home of the singer and writer Al Green, the filmmakers Paul Schrader and Leonard Schrader, the singer and writer Anthony Kiedis, and the boxer Floyd Mayweather. President Gerald Ford was also from Grand Rapids. The bordering city of East Grand Rapids was the home of the screenwriter Adam Herz. The writer Chris Van Allsburg lived in both cities, as did I. The singer and writer Iggy Pop was born in Muskegon, not far away. The baseball player Derek Jeter grew up in Kalamazoo, also close to Grand Rapids. But Western Michigan did not fit into their plans for future career paths, so they all left it. I was destined to do the same.

My father was a veteran of World War II and the Korean War, and he volunteered to serve in both. In Saipan, he was shot at by Japanese troops (but they missed). In my childhood, he sometimes told us about his travels during his years as a sailor in the Merchant Marines and Navy to places like China, Japan, the Netherlands, Brazil, San Francisco, and New York. I dreamed of one day making similar travels.

I'd begun fantasizing about leaving Michigan from as early as I can remember, looking out my elementary school classroom window, imagining what it would be like to ride off into the west, chasing the sun.

At least part of this fantasizing had to do with my father. However, my strongest memories of him during my childhood are not as a romantic sailor, but as a manipulative, alcoholic bully. His abuse was usually verbal, but sometimes physical – for example, when I was 16, he kicked me in the groin just after he, my mother, my four younger siblings and I had finished dinner.

"Do me a favor and just run away!" he demanded. "Just get out of my life."

In fact, I was considering leaving that night, and would have if I'd had the money, but by that time most of the money I earned on my paper route went to drugs and alcohol. I'd also been plagued with allergies and asthma since coming into adolescence and if I'd run away, I wasn't sure how far I'd get. When I was 17, he backhanded me in front of my girlfriend at the time. My ears rang from the blow. If it hadn't been for the fact I'd had a girlfriend, I probably would have run away that night too.

*

A week before my seventh birthday, in the summer of 1966, we moved from suburban Detroit to a big, red brick house my father had bought, about twice as big as our family needed. Destiny had brought me to Grand Rapids (East Grand Rapids, actually, though right on the border; if you walked through our backyard you were in Grand Rapids). After a few years of living in that house, my father was drowning in debt, having spent money he didn't have and mismanaging what he did have. His job as a stockbroker relied on commissions, and if he didn't make the trades, he didn't bring home the bacon. He drowned himself in alcohol to try to self-medicate his way through the pain and humiliation of not being able to be the sole breadwinner of the family.

Thus began my adolescence.

My mother went to work as a teacher in the mid-1970s to help support the family, and as far as I can remember, she was soon providing more financially than my father was able to. In the meantime, in 1972, at the age of thirteen, I had begun delivering the *Detroit Free Press*, getting up at 5:00 every morning to do so. The paper route provided me with spending money and, because it was a morning paper, allowed me to attend hockey practice after school.

I had been going to a Catholic elementary school a half block up the street, but I went to public schools in East Grand Rapids from seventh grade through my sophomore year of high school. The Catholic school, St. Stephen, was integrated with blacks and whites, but I don't think East Grand Rapids Junior and Senior High Schools had more than one or two black people in them when I was there.

I once got a ride home from a football game from Buster Mathis, a former pro boxer (who had beaten Joe Frazier to qualify for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as an amateur, and had once fought Muhammad Ali as a pro). [2]. He was friends with the family of a black friend of mine.

The film *American Pie*, written by Adam Herz, is based on his time as a student at East Grand Rapids High School. The story is a comedic rendering of high school buddies attempting to lose their virginity before they graduate. My take on East Grand Rapids and its high school is different though, as I viewed them from a different vantage point and through a darker lens than Herz.

In eighth grade, there was a class bully – in fact, almost a caricature of a bully. He was also the most popular kid in the school and a star football player. He hated blacks, he hated Jews, and he hated me.

In my sophomore year at East Grand Rapids High School, I heard from a friend of mine that the bully had taken a Jewish teammate out of the showers after a football practice, grabbed him by his ankles, and dragged him outside naked into the parking lot, with the Jewish kid's genitals scraping against the pavement as he screamed in protest and agony.

"Why?" I asked the friend, before I took a hit off a joint another friend passed to me.

"Because Cohen [3] is a Jew," he answered.

The prototypical bully was a Catholic. *So much for the Golden Rule, peace, and loving your neighbor,* I thought, though I'd already concluded long ago that most of the Catholics I knew were hypocritical.

I also heard that one night someone had burned a cross in the front lawn of a black family (perhaps the only black family) in East Grand Rapids. I wondered if it was the bully who did it. It certainly would have been in character.

*

Though my father didn't have much money during my adolescence, he did have an amply supplied liquor cabinet, and in my sophomore year of

high school, I began liberating what I thought were unnoticeable, conservative amounts from each bottle inside it. I used these to make one big concoction – a “graveyard,” my buddies and I called it – consisting of everything from gin, vodka, and whiskey to wine to various liqueurs. The “graveyard” certainly did taste like death, but it also gave us a helluva buzz. Anyway, sometimes my father would notice something fishy about how the quantity of his stash of libations miraculously dried up, and once in a while, when I was in another room, I’d hear him say something like, “Fee-fi-fo-fum, where’s the rest of my booze?”

My mother wouldn’t answer, and in any case was probably too preoccupied with trying to make ends meet and keep our family together to worry about my father’s next liquor fix. I’m assuming that, by that time, she must have concluded that there was no escape. Aside from the fact the Catholic Church doesn’t recognize divorces, she had nowhere to go with five kids. So, apparently, divorce from my father wasn’t an option.

By the beginning of my sophomore year, I’d cultivated a yen for chemical substances, just as my father had. However, rather than alcohol, I was drawn toward the delights of THC, and later PCP, along with one mescaline trip in late winter and my first LSD trip in midsummer, after my sophomore year.

Several things – this alphabet soup of chemicals, getting arrested once with two buddies for possession of marijuana and a bottle of booze I’d stolen from the next door neighbors, being brought home by the cops because I bought a case of beer at a liquor store in the neighborhood (the store had to close because it had sold to me, a minor) – spurred my parents to decide that I needed a stricter Catholic education. So they transferred me to Catholic Central High School, which was located a few blocks from downtown Grand Rapids, in the middle of the city’s skid row.

Just as a dog sniffing around the grounds finds a place to pee, I sniffed out the drugs at Catholic Central. Being in the middle of skid row gave Catholic Central what I thought was a romantic air. I would look to the west out the window and across Division Avenue I would see a group of men huddled together at 7:45 in the morning, passing around a bottle, waiting for the bar they stood in front of to open. I sometimes wished I

was with them; they surely would have had some adventurous tales to tell, I thought. But my long-term goals were set much farther west – to the Golden Gate Bridge, the Pacific Ocean, and beyond.

The area around Catholic Central had several alleys and a couple of abandoned buildings that afforded me and the other stoners in the school good places to smoke a quick joint before school and during our 20-minute lunch break.

I always liked to read and one of the books I read at Catholic Central was Anthony Scaduto's biography of Bob Dylan. But it wasn't assigned reading. I'd hide it inside whatever book we were supposed to be studying in class and turn the pages, reading about Dylan dropping out of college and moving to New York City and finding its bohemian culture in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s more to his liking than the Midwest he grew up in. A quiet kid and a reader, like Dylan had been when he was in high school, I considered a move to New York. I could run away there as soon as I had enough money, even if I had to steal it. However, I ultimately concluded New York was too close to Michigan, and I'd already visited the city in 1969 on a family trip. [4] I wanted to go someplace I had never been and much farther away.

I honestly believe I got a better education through my experiences and my own recreational reading in high school than I did in my classes. Sometimes I would skip school and go to the public library up the street to read magazine articles and books like *Portnoy's Complaint* (often smoking a joint on the way, in one of the alleys conveniently located nearby).

I would think up creative excuses for why I had missed class. In my senior year, I took two classes at Grand Rapids Junior College (aka "JC"), a short walk away. When confronted, I would tell my teachers at Catholic Central something like, "Well, we had a field trip at JC, and I couldn't make any of my morning classes (or afternoon classes – or any classes) at Catholic Central. Umm . . . sorry I forgot to tell you about that earlier." All the while, I'd be hoping I didn't reek too much from marijuana or whiskey.

Sometimes my excuses didn't stick, and I'd have to stay after school for detention.

[1] The second largest city in Michigan in population (just under 200,000). Detroit is the largest.

[2] Buster Mathis later broke his hand when sparring with Joe Frazier, while preparing for the Olympics, so he couldn’t go. Frazier went in his place and won a gold medal.

[3] “Cohen” is not his real name.

[4] In February 1969. It turned out to be during a terrible snowstorm. This was when my father was still making good money.

## 2. The window and the cold

My parents’ ancestors from both sides of my family made their trips across the ocean to the North American Continent from the British Isles (Scotland on my father’s side, Ireland on my mother’s; her maiden name is “Murphy”) in the 18th and19th centuries. One ancestor on my father’s side had fought for the Union Army in the Civil War. One ancestor on my mother’s side had spent the last thirty years of her life in an insane asylum in the 20th century.

My mother grew up Catholic in the suburbs of Buffalo, New York and in Detroit, and my father grew up in suburban Cleveland. He converted to Catholicism from Episcopalianism after he had learned about the religion from an ethnic Irish friend of his in Detroit, before my father met my mother. I imagine this man had been my father's best friend.

One day, a few years after my parents had wed in 1958, the man who had introduced my father to Catholicism looked out of a window in Detroit and then decided to take his life by jumping from it.

Like the ghost inside my father's best friend, I too fantasized about jumping from a window when I’d stare out of one during school. But I wanted to escape beyond that pane of glass and into the wild blue yonder to begin my life, not to end it, and to do as my ancestors had – venture a new life on a continent across the ocean.

*

Once, one Detroit winter, when I was about two or three years old, my father came home and I touched one of his leather shoes as he was stepping in the door of the modest brick house he rented in the northeast part of the city.

"Cold," I said, looking up at his wiry, six-foot frame, covered with a trench coat that seemed just a little too light for the weather. His cold, blue-grey eyes looked out from a face that was slightly red from the wind and most likely a gin and tonic he’d imbibed with colleagues from the investment firm he worked at downtown.

This was the first of many times I remember being confronted with cold the outside had brought to my life.

## 3. Sports

I started playing organized sports in third grade – football, basketball, and baseball – but the sport I excelled at (I didn't really excel at any of the others, though I loved playing them) was hockey. My father would have us flood the backyard every winter and that's how I learned to skate, stickhandle, and shoot. Organized hockey came to Grand Rapids in 1971, and because I'd had experience on the rink in our backyard, I could usually hold my own on the teams I played on.

However, I always preferred playing pickup games of any sport to the organized games, because the games we kids organized were just much more fun.

A family that moved in across the street in the mid-1970s had two boys who were to make All-American when they played college football and three boys who would all wind up playing NFL football. They were all exceptional hockey players too.

A few other guys in the local league were also very good hockey players. Most of them had moved to Grand Rapids from Detroit, Chicago, or Canada, though. Because Grand Rapids had just started organized hockey, it didn't have many experienced players.

My father began coaching the Catholic Central hockey team when I was in high school. I didn't want to play for my father, because I wanted to succeed or fail on my own, not with him at my side. But since he was the coach, I had no choice. Before games, some of the other players and I would smoke a joint or two (unbeknownst to my father), then another one or two after the games. My father would undoubtedly drink after the games (and perhaps before too).

When I broke my arm in a game in my junior year, I had to sit out of hockey games for over a month. After my cast came off, I played in a few games at the end of the season, but I wasn't as keen on hockey as I had been. Before I broke my arm, I had been injured numerous times – mostly in the elbows and knees. That, coupled with enjoying the delights of drugs and girls more than hockey, and having a job to boot, led me to decide I didn't want to play in my senior year. So I didn't.

## 4. The secret stairway, the skeleton key, the baby, and the alley cat

Our house had a stairway that led up from the garage to the room that my brother and I shared, which we called "the secret stairway." Sometimes, my friends and I would play around on the steps of the secret stairway during the day, and occasionally when we had the nerve, we would open the door in the wall to the musty, dusty crawlspace.

It was there, when I was seven years old, that we found a skeleton key. “It belongs to a ghost,” one of my friends, a year older than I was, said. But I picked the key up anyway and fondled it for a few seconds.

“You should leave it there,” my friend warned.

I placed it back on the floor of the crawlspace and he closed the door. Later, though, I entered the secret stairway alone at night, took the key out, and put it under the mattress of my bed.

*

The door to the secret stairway in our room had a chain lock, and I often had nightmares about someone – a ghost, someone from the nearby ghetto or maybe Adolph Hitler – sneaking into our house via the secret stairway, and managing to unlock the chain on the door. Because the door wasn't bolted, someone could have easily opened the door a few inches – as far as the chain would stretch – and stick her or his hand through the opening. I would often lie in bed, on the verge of sleep, and recall that I had forgotten to lock the secret stairway. I would then get out of bed to do so. Sometimes, we would hear noises nearby, sounding like they were coming from the garage below us or (we could have sworn) from inside the secret stairway. We imagined those noises were made by someone who was going to break into our house through the secret stairway and murder us in our sleep.

However, the secret stairway was also the first step on the road to freedom, and it was where I considered starting my journey to a new world when my father told me to run away and get out of his life.

Sometimes, when we played around in our backyard, a woman with a French accent, who lived in one of the houses behind ours, would open

her window to admonish us. "Shh, Baby sleeping!" she would say, and for years I would hear a loud, whining noise at night as I lay in our bed, which sounded like a baby crying out. I thought this mysterious foreign woman might have let her baby out in the middle of the night to play around by itself and whine to its heart’s content, and perhaps even venture a trip into the secret stairway.

As I listened to the baby's screams coming from the bushes in our backyard near the narrow alley, where I’d smoked my first cigarette, I wondered if the foreign woman was trying to get back at us for waking her baby up during the day. However, neither my brother, my friends in the neighborhood nor I ever saw this mysterious baby. In any case, I found out later that the screams at night didn't come from a baby, but from a wild alley cat that I saw once during the day – a big, ugly, mean-looking creature. It cried out just one more night after I had seen it. I was expecting to hear it again – in fact, almost looking forward to it – but it had left, vanishing into the woods with its screams to commune with all the other ghosts. And along with the alley cat went the mysterious foreign woman. I had always wanted to go into that woman's house, make a full investigation of what was taking place there, and meet her strange baby. But I never saw the woman or heard about her baby again.

## 5. Girlfriend, D’Amico’s, death, and wanderlust

Shortly after I broke my arm, I went to a party. There, I met a pretty Italian girl, a sophomore, who signed my cast. And shortly after that party, a friend and I were sitting in a car in the parking lot, while a dance was taking place in the gym. His girlfriend and my girlfriend-to-be walked out to the car. They got in and my friend and his girlfriend immediately began making out in the front seat. After a few uncomfortable seconds, my friend's girlfriend turned toward her friend and me, sitting in the back seat. "Do you guys wanna try?" she asked.

With barely an introduction, we did. It was great, kissing in the back seat in the Catholic Central parking lot that cold, snowy Michigan night, surrounded by a ghetto and skid row, next to a run-down apartment building inhabited by winos. I felt just about as good as I’d ever felt in my life.

A few months later, in the spring of 1976, my junior year at Catholic Central, a friend came up to me during a break and asked me if I wanted a job. I did; the paper route I had not providing me with much money. [1]

The job was at an Italian market, D’Amico’s, on South Division Avenue. There were housing projects on the south side of D'Amico's and the Lime Lite bar on the north side. Hookers were more often than not hanging out in front of the Lime Lite bar and would sometimes proposition us as we came to or left work.

I drank my first cup of coffee at D'Amico's. One of the guys who worked there offered it to me on my break during my first day of work. I suppose that was fitting, given the fact that D'Amico's was a new chapter in my life. Nothing like beginning a new chapter in life with a hot cup of strong coffee.

D'Amico's was a small, but very busy, grocery store that had been in existence since the turn of the (19th to 20th) century.

Al Green, among many others in its long history, had worked there.

When I worked there, D’Amico’s had the normal complement of packaged goods, a large section of fresh and frozen vegetables on the

south side of the store, beer and wine on the north side, and in the back of the store – the west side – was the meat section, where I worked as a butcher. We stood behind a long counter over a case that displayed such things as beef tripe, sweetbreads, pig ribs, pig skins, pig's feet, ears, jowls and snouts, ham hocks (fresh as well as smoked), neckbones (fresh as well as smoked), pig tails (fresh as well as smoked), pig brains (fresh only), pig heads (a variety of sizes, fresh as well as smoked), and beef testicles (AKA "mountain oysters," fresh only). This was in addition to the normal complement of hamburger, pork sausage, and other cuts of pork and beef, and, once in a while, lamb.

Our clientele at D'Amico's was at least 90 percent black, but there were a good number of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans too, as well as some East Asians. Sometimes some very beautiful, very well-dressed hookers came into the store, many of them white. Though we could tell they were hookers, many of them must have been call girls because they looked too sophisticated to be streetwalkers. We'd drool over them as they looked at the fresh meat in the display case. They always came with the same impeccably dressed black guy, who I assumed was their pimp.

I remember once seeing a very attractive black girl standing in front of the meat counter on a very busy Saturday, when the store was packed with customers. She caught my attention because she was wearing a T-shirt that read "HAPPINESS IS A TIGHT PUSSY."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Thirteen," she answered, smiling at me as she picked up the package of baloney I'd sliced for her.

Among the other customers was a flamboyant black transvestite who'd walk down the aisle swinging his hips under his dress and talk to us about the boyfriend he had, though none of us asked him to. After we handed the transvestite his order, we'd try to hold our laughter as he turned his back and walked away – revealing hairy legs under his dress.

The owner of D'Amico's was an elderly Italian widow who walked with a cane, stooped over. She'd won a million dollars in the Michigan lottery shortly before I began to work at the store. But even though she'd become a millionaire, she didn't want to sell the business she and her

family had spent her life running, and she didn't pay us any more than she would have if she'd been dirt poor. But she always paid us on time – in cash.

Sometimes some of the customers would come in and say, "I wanna see D'Amico. I wan' some of that million dollar!" Usually, they were joking. Sometimes, though, you could see they were serious, and in an angry way, as if what they really wanted to say was: "You've been selling me my food for decades, and I've been a faithful customer, but you've done everything you could to squeeze every last penny out of me. You've been unfair and it's unfair that you get a million dollars from the government, yet I get nothing!"

I worked at D'Amico's after school from about 3:30 until 6:00, when the store closed. I also worked there on weekends: Saturday from 8: 00 in the morning until 6:00 at night, and Sunday from 8:00 in the morning until the store closed, at 1:00 in the afternoon. I started out at just over minimum wage, about two dollars an hour, which wasn't so bad for a high school student in the spring of 1976. It was usually hard work. We'd carry big pails of roughly ground beef or pork from the cooler and grind it to the consistency of hamburger or sausage for the case. We'd slice bacon, chop up neckbones with a meat cleaver, cut up chickens (slice off the wings and legs with a knife, then cut the body in half with a meat cleaver – all almost in one motion), cut up frozen beef tripe into rectangular blocks with a band saw, take out five and ten pound pails of chitterlings from the freezer, and weigh up cuts of steak and chops that "Sully," the old Irish butcher in his 70s, would cut up.

Sometimes, in addition to the pails of roughly ground beef or sausage, we'd have to bring out very heavy cuts of beef from the cooler for Sully to chop and slice up. Once, when I came into the cooler to fetch something or other, one of the other butchers, who was in the cooler on some errand himself, said, "Hey, Don! Look!" and proceeded to step into the ground beef and stomp up and down in it with his boots on.

We put sawdust on the floor so we wouldn't slip on the grease and fall on our asses. Since we were often very busy and there was so little space to move around in, we sometimes inadvertently dropped pork sausage or hamburger onto the sawdust-covered floor when we were scooping it out. Our manager would make sure we picked it back up, washed it off, and put it back in the case while he spied us from behind,

looking through a partition with a horizontal slit in it, just below eye level. There was almost always some sawdust we couldn't wash off, and the manager knew it, but we had to put it back in the case and sell it anyway.

The fat, miserly manager would stoop down and look through the slit in the partition as he ate Milky Way candy bars, keeping an eye on us as we sold the meat, and keeping an eye out for any potential thieves among the customers, who might put a can or two of food in their bag or purse to supplement their food stamp purchases as they moved down the aisles in front of the meat counter. Sometimes, the other butchers and I would rip off meat from D'Amico's, wrapping it up while the manager had his back turned and hiding it in the cooler behind the pig heads until the shift was over.

On summer holidays – like Labor Day, the Fourth of July, and Memorial Day – customers would line up through the aisles and out onto the sidewalk in front of the store. We sold boxes and boxes and boxes of pork ribs those days. And the days leading up to Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's were just as busy.

Often, we'd smoke a joint or a couple of bowls of marijuana or some hash on the way to work or on our break. When we got into work, we would go into the cooler to fetch something or other and see a fresh supply of pig heads lining the wall, with their eyes bulging out and mouths open. It was about then that the marijuana would kick in and we felt the full effects of it. There was just no way we could hold back our stoned laughter.

Usually, by the end of the day at D'Amico's, I was pretty burned out. I'd go home and take a shower to try to get the meat smell off of me if I was going to see my girlfriend. As hard as I tried, though, I could never completely wash away the smell of animal flesh and blood.

I liked my job at D'Amico's, for the most part, and didn't want to leave it, but my father wanted me to work somewhere else. So, in the summer between my junior and senior years of high school, he introduced me to a guy who did painting and carpentry. I worked for him part-time for a little while (though still keeping my job at D'Amico's), but didn't care for the work and spent most of the time I was supposed to be working either sleeping or smoking pot. The job

didn't last long, and I was happy when it was over. I was also happy I hadn't quit my job at D'Amico's. Years later, I was to find myself working as a carpenter's apprentice again, but there was no D'Amico's to fall back on at that time.

The summer before my senior year at Catholic Central, Tom – the friend who'd gotten me the job at D'Amico's – came up to me with a smile on his face at work one day and asked, "How much do you think it would cost to get drunk tonight?"

"'Bout ten bucks, I guess," I told him, as I was chopping up neckbones with a meat cleaver.

Then, about half an hour later, while I was weighing pig's feet for a customer, he came up to me again and asked if he could borrow ten bucks. I told him he could and after I wrapped up the pig's feet and gave the package to the customer across the counter, I opened my wallet.

"What are you doing tonight?" I asked, as I handed him a couple of fives.

"Kalamazoo," he answered, "with a friend of mine."

Though Kalamazoo might sound like a faraway place you might only get a glimpse of in a dream, like Oz, Heaven, or Hades, it is actually only about 50 miles south of Grand Rapids.

The next morning, as I was punching in on the time clock, the manager approached me.

"Tom died last night, in a car accident in Kalamazoo," he said, facing me, his clean, white apron hugging his potbelly.

My ten dollars was gone with Tom.

*

A few months later, while working at D'Amico's, I was slicing bacon one Saturday morning. I had done cocaine for the first time the night before,

along with smoking pot and drinking a little. My girlfriend and I had had a spat and the combination of the chemicals and emotions swimming through my brain began to cloud my eyes with tears as I worked hurriedly to slice bacon for an impatient customer – too hurriedly, it turned out. I sliced off the tip of my right middle finger. Blood flowed onto the floor. I told the manager what had happened and one of my co-workers took me to the closest hospital, a couple of blocks from Catholic Central.

*

In 1960, students from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor formed Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and later wrote the Port Huron Statement. One could argue these acts commenced the political activism of the 1960s.

I had been eligible for two academic scholarships my last semester at Catholic Central – the State of Michigan Scholarship and the Michigan State Scholarship. [2] If I had been eligible for a scholarship to the University of Michigan, I might have pursued it, given that Ann Arbor and U of M were focal points of progressive politics (not to mention that Ann Arbor had some of the most liberal marijuana laws in the country). However, other than the prospect of going to college in Ann Arbor, I had no desire to remain in Michigan.

I had thought about what I was going to do after graduating from high school, all geared toward getting as far away from Grand Rapids as I could. I thought about joining the Army, after I read a story in the newspaper that the GI bill was about to end. I reasoned that since I was 17, I could quit school and join the Army, which would put me a comfortable distance from people like my father and the bullies of East Grand Rapids. Then, when I got out of the Army, I could get a GED and go to college, while learning a trade, like auto mechanics, along the way. However, there was a problem in this reasoning: I was in love with a girl and I didn’t want to leave her.

But wanderlust won out after a very hard battle.

A few weeks before I graduated from high school, after a day at D’Amico’s, I told my girlfriend, "I don't want to be dependent on you." We were parked on a hill overlooking the city and the Grand River that

runs through its center. The next time we met, she told me, "I *do* want to be dependent on you," as her hand gently squeezed my knee. But I was busy lighting a joint and sucking on the smoke. I did something cruel that I still regret: I ignored her. Her words exited my brain, whirled around, and escaped with the blue smoke I exhaled, soon replaced with a sedated buzz. After that, I didn't hear from her for several weeks, and she always seemed listless when I called her up on the phone.

One night, I drove to the Burger King where she worked, to be there when she got off work. When closing time came, I stood in front of the locked glass door, looking into her brown eyes, but she wouldn't open the door for me.

Just after I had graduated from high school, when I was 17, my father had set me up for an interview for a job at a factory. It was a company called Advance Packaging and it produced cardboard products, many of them for the auto companies in Michigan. My father was a dyed-in-the-wool Republican and hated unions, so it was a non-union job.

We worked four-day weeks, ten hours a day. Sometimes, I was offered overtime work (and pay). I hated the job almost as much as my father hated Democrats and unions, and after a while I missed D'Amico's. Soon, after the manager at D'Amico's asked me if I wanted to work there part-time, I was working at D'Amico's on weekends and keeping my job at the factory. Total work time: six days a week. I bought a car with my savings – a 1972 Pinto firebomb [3] – and bought a stereo to put in it.

But the Pinto couldn't take me far enough away. I had to find another conduit to lead me to the next chapter in my life.

[1] After a couple of years delivering the Detroit Free Press, I switched jobs and began delivering the afternoon paper, the Grand Rapids Press, with a short stint in between working in food service at Blodgett Hospital, which was located in my neighborhood.

[2] These scholarship offers could not have had anything to do with my grades, which were mediocre. I had done well on the English portion of either the SAT or ACT standardized tests (or both; I can't remember) and that, coupled with the fact that I had life experience working, as

well as having an athletic letter in hockey, must have convinced someone I'd be a good prospect at a college in Michigan. When my name was noted on the program for the Catholic Central Class of 1977 graduation ceremony, under "Scholarships and Awards" – not once, but twice – some of the other students seemed surprised.

[3] Not long after I bought it, I began reading in newspapers about accidents in which the Pinto was rear-ended and literally went up in flames, because of where the gas tank was positioned. I actually was rear-ended once, but luckily the car didn't ignite.

## 6. Gazing at Japan

Japan in the 1980s and early ‘90s was considered a threat to the US economy. Ezra Vogel’s *Japan as Number One* was a bestseller. Japanese companies were making inroads into the US market that people had considered unthinkable not long before. The focus seemed to be on the auto industry of my home state of Michigan. Also, though, the Japanese had acquired Columbia Pictures, Rockefeller Center, and Pebble Beach golf course – all American icons.

Japan’s trade practices, the collusion between corporate Japan and Japan’s government bureaucracy,  the high quality of most Japanese goods (compared to what seemed to be increasingly shoddy American goods), a dedicated workforce (compared to what many people thought was an increasingly lazy workforce in the US), a seemingly egalitarian system of capitalism and management (Japanese bosses actually ate their lunches with their employees, it was said) all seemed a threat as well as a warning to the US and the rest of the world: If we didn’t get our act together we’d get what we deserve – from the Japanese.

Japan’s rise to the top of the world (the number two economy behind the US, with a population less than half that of the US) was called a miracle. Japan had built itself up, through hard work, from nearly complete devastation at the end of World War II. Many people, including me, had great admiration for what Japan had done, but more seemed resentful.

I had little sympathy for Japan’s detractors, the “Japan-bashers.” A shade of racism seemed to pervade the criticism of Japan. *It was the US that needed to get its house in order,* I thought. Japan had done what the US had wanted – built itself up as a capitalist democracy in an ethical way – and it was now competing with the US. And the US seemed to be scared as hell.

When I visited Japan in the Navy in 1982, I saw clean streets, people who were polite, trains that ran on time, and technology that was at least as good as that in the US. I also saw many people who went out of their way to help me when I asked for directions, people who spoke good English (I couldn’t think of anyone in the US – except for Japanese – who spoke Japanese), and people who seemed genuinely friendly in

the restaurants, hotels, and bars I went to. I couldn't think of a similar situation for a Japanese coming to the US.

And besides all that, the US had dropped not one but two nuclear bombs on Japan – yet they still loved us!

*What the hell is wrong with us?* I thought. *Why can't we get our act together? Why don't we learn about Japan? The Japanese seem to be trying to learn as much as they can about the US – and forgiving us for nuking them, as well as for putting Japanese Americans in internment camps. The Japanese eat a healthy diet, so they're thin. Americans eat a lot of junk food, so we're fat. And yet Americans complain about Japan. What the hell is going on?*

I was determined to learn as much about Japan as I could. By the time I visited Japan in the Navy, I had already dropped into the movie theater in San Francisco's Japantown on liberty. I knew Japan's art, literature, and film were among the best in the world. And not only all that, I thought Japanese women were attractive.

I thought that California might be an anti-bully, anti-establishment mecca, with liberal marijuana laws and a liberal governor in the 1970s (Jerry Brown). However, I found out California was not the land of milk and honey I hoped it would be. Being in the military in the San Francisco Bay Area, I was usually treated at best with indifference. I thought this ironic, given that the prevalent liberal attitude of the area seemed to encompass anti-racism and anti-discrimination. But because of what we represented (the Vietnam War was still fresh on everyone's mind), liberal ideas of treating people in the military well didn't seem to apply.

I thought they might apply in Japan. I had been treated much better there than in the US while in the military, and I thought if I lived there as a civilian it could only get better.

In the late '80s and early '90s, I read news articles that foretold Japan's economic decline, but I considered those alarmist (very naively, as it turned out).

Another country I'd begun studying on my own was Vietnam. Since the time I'd been in East Asia in the Navy, I'd talked with people who'd been in Vietnam during the war (American Vietnam veterans and

Vietnamese; I once dated a Vietnamese girl). Because the war in the ‘60s and ‘70s had had such a profound effect on American society, I had also read several books on the country.

Just after I’d finished Stanley Karnow’s *Vietnam: A History*, I returned it to the bookshelf at the motel I was working at in San Francisco. A new employee walked in the door to take over the desk clerk duties for me that night and saw the book. He then told me he’d been in Vietnam as a medic in the Army. He picked the book up and read it within a couple days, later saying it was the most comprehensive book he’d read on Vietnam.

In my last semester at UC Berkeley, in autumn 1990, I took a class on Japanese politics. During office hours with my professor, I noticed *Vietnam: A History* on his bookshelf and asked him if he could recommend a book as comprehensive on Japan as Karnow’s book was on Vietnam. He recommended Karel van Wolferen’s *The Enigma of Japanese Power.*

The professor had assigned us an essay of van Wolferen’s to read in the class and I felt it was “Japan bashing,” so I wasn’t immediately interested in the book. However, a couple of months later, after completing my coursework for a Bachelor’s degree in English and shortly before moving to Japan, I bought the book, along with many others on Japan. It proved to be one of my best investments.

## 7. Japan prelude

The first memory I have of a conversation on Japan was when I was looking at a world map, with my mother nearby, in our house in Detroit in the early 1960s. I must have been told that Japan had gone to war with China, because I remember asking my mother, “How can a country as small as Japan start a war with a country as big as China?”

My mother sighed and said something like, “Well, small countries can do a lot of bad things and hurt a lot of people, even in big countries.” I wasn’t completely satisfied with the answer. Perhaps that was when I began my quest (subconsciously) to dig into the mystery of this small country. [1]

My father would talk about his time as a sailor from World War II to the Korean War at the dinner table. He would sometimes mention Japan, where he’d spent time during the Korean War and where he’d been headed when Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been bombed with nuclear weapons and Japan had finally surrendered. I asked him once, one Saturday afternoon in the mid-1960s, about Japan and World War II. I recall him saying something like Japan’s power in World War II was a fluke and Japan would never come close to being a power again. This seemed to be the consensus of most Americans, given that Japanese products were considered shoddy at the time. The term “Made in Japan” was considered an insult.

It was around this time that one of my teachers at St. Stephen talked about the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I recall her gravely describing the pain and suffering of the victims, giving the example of a woman whose skin became burned with the pattern of the clothes she was wearing when the bomb was dropped over Hiroshima.

As I recall, the teacher mentioned that even though the war was about to end, we had decided to use nuclear weapons.

I asked my father that night at dinner why we dropped nuclear bombs on Japan. He tried to explain that Japan had done terribly brutal things for years during the war and that we had warned Japan we would destroy the country if it didn’t surrender. Japan chose not to surrender, so we dropped nuclear bombs.

This, of course, was during the Vietnam War, when more and more Americans began to seriously question our motives and ethics not only at the time, but in our history. [2]

Later, at East Grand Rapids High School, I met the first Japanese person I can remember having a conversation with before I joined the Navy to leave Michigan when I was 19. (There was one Chinese-American guy and one Japanese-American guy in my classes, which, along with the one or two blacks, a few Native Americans, a few Latinos and the community of Jews, was about the extent of ethnic minorities living in East Grand Rapids.)

The Japanese guy, like me, was a stoner. The only thing I recall him saying about Japan concerned a trip he and his family had made there. “It’s a weird place, man!” he told us, drawing out the word “weird” for effect, then letting out a nervous (probably marijuana-induced) laugh.

I moved on from suburban, upper-middle class East Grand Rapids to the next step on the road destiny had laid out for me – Catholic Central and skid row – and worked a mind-numbing job at Advance Packaging, where I eventually moved up the factory ladder to operating a die-cut press. [3] I began to drink and do drugs with some of the guys I worked with. Once, a guy invited me to his apartment to smoke pot. I met his roommate, a Vietnam veteran who was unemployed but seemed to work hard – at being stoned most of the time. Later, the veteran’s brother (also a veteran of the Army, but not Vietnam) and another Vietnam veteran would come over. They would tell me stories about the military. Though they never encouraged me to join, I felt that if I did I’d at least experience something different from the monotonous life of Grand Rapids.

In June 1978, when I was 18 years old, I moved out of my parents’ house (where they’d been charging me room and board since I’d graduated from high school) to my own apartment. One day, just as I was about to leave for work, I got a call at my apartment from a Marine recruiter, who asked me to come in for an interview. I arrived at the appointed time, but he wasn’t there. The Navy recruiters offered me a seat and after 15 minutes or so, asked if I was interested in the Navy. I was, and not long after, I was sworn in to the Navy in Detroit and took a train to Chicago for boot camp.

By spring of 1978, I'd completely quit drugs (developing an almost puritanical aversion to them). I also quit eating junk food and began meditating, jogging, and doing calisthenics daily. The allergies and asthma that had plagued me had disappeared.

The recruiter told me as he was completing forms, "Now, you look like a healthy young man, so what I'm going to do is just check 'No' next to the place where it asks about drug history."

"Well, but, um, I actually have used drugs," I told him.

"Well, keep in mind that drug use might prevent you from getting some schools in the Navy. How many times have you used marijuana?" he asked.

"Um, geez, I don't know. We used to smoke . . ."

"Well, I'll put down, 'twelve times, experimental use,'" he said.

I didn't argue with him. I had to get out of Grand Rapids. I did feel a little hesitant about joining the Navy when he told me about his time in Vietnam and scalping dead "gooks." "We would put the scalps on our belts," he told me. "Like a trophy."

In Detroit, where I was processed into the service, along with hundreds of others, we filled out forms and got physicals. One of the forms had questions about our medical history. The Air Force enlisted man who gave us instructions said, "If you're going into the Navy and you have allergies, just check 'No' for allergies, because there's nothing to be allergic to on a ship at sea."

I had felt the twinge of an ethical dilemma before I filled out the form, but his advice proved to be the stroke of luck I needed. Under "asthma" I also checked "No," given that my asthma was due to allergies.

Shortly after, I was put on a train with two other Navy recruits. We arrived at Great Lakes Naval Station, outside Chicago, on Tuesday, 21 November 1978, two days before Thanksgiving. It was a cold night, with the first snowflakes of the season falling.

Our Company Commander was First Class Petty Officer Chan, who had won accolades on the base for commanding the best company just before our time began. He had a reputation for being hard-nosed and ruthless, which proved to be accurate. He was a Chinese Filipino who had also been in Vietnam. There were a few other Vietnam veterans in the company who had been in the Army and Air Force previously, had gotten out, and then years later joined the Navy. Because they had been separated from service for so long, they had to go through boot camp again.

Eight-and-a-half weeks later, during a bitterly cold winter, we graduated. (There had been a big snowstorm our last scheduled week there, and the airports had closed. We wound up having to stay a few extra days, shoveling snow.)

I then went to Radioman school in San Diego, finishing in late April. I was then assigned to one of the Navy's oldest aircraft carriers at the time – the *USS Coral Sea* – homeported in Alameda, on the east side of San Francisco Bay. I took ten days' leave in Michigan, then flew from Chicago to San Francisco on 9 May 1978.

I hadn't made hotel reservations, so when I arrived at San Francisco Airport, I went to a bank of phones, where there were advertisements for hotels. I saw one in Japantown, which seemed an exotic place to me (at the time I had absolutely no inkling that I was destined to live 11 years of my life in Japan), so I made a reservation, then stepped outside for a cab.

I told the driver where I was going. He then got on his radio and in a New York accent asked his dispatcher, "What's the best way to get to Jap-town?" [4]

I checked into the hotel late at night, greeted by a desk clerk drinking milk out of a small carton. He mumbled a few words to himself and seemed stoned. A few minutes later, I put my things in my room and then walked through the neighborhoods surrounding the hotel.

By that time, I'd already read Jack Kerouac and was familiar with the Beat writers of the 1950s, as well as – of course – with the hippies of the 1960s. San Francisco had seemed a mecca when I was growing up in the Midwest, and I thought it might be my Promised Land.

It was colder than I’d expected and I wore my Navy issue peacoat. The wind was brisk, penetrating the coat’s woolen threads and whipping through to my skin. The light hitting the Victorian buildings. The hilly terrain. Japanese, Italian, Korean, Mexican food cooking. Sight, sound, smell, and touch mixed like a painting on canvas to create a taste that to me felt magical – nothing like I’d experienced in the Midwest, or even Southern California. I'd imagined the city had been built on dreams, dreams of gold most certainly, but other dreams as well – dreams of the hippies in Haight-Ashbury, dreams of the beats in North Beach, dreams of other sailors like me who'd passed through the city on their way to the other side of the world, many of them never to return. Though East is East and West is West, I thought the twain might meet in San Francisco.

There were the dreams of the Mexican and Spanish settlers and the native peoples there before them, weaving baskets, unaware of the immigrants who would come and snuff out their dreams under the power of the cross in the Mission Dolores. Perhaps there was a darker dream as well, a primal dream that had been part of the California hills before recorded history, beckoning people from across the world, only to trap those immigrants’ dreams in bondage at the edge of the North American continent, with nowhere for them or their dreams to go but west into the abyss of the Pacific Ocean, where I was headed. And if fate smiled upon those who made the journey, they might wake up on the other side of the experience better for having gone through the process.

I set my five foot, ten inch, 150 pound frame on a park bench that night after my long walk and lit a cigarette, thinking about the prospect of deserting from the Navy, staying in San Francisco, and making up my own dream to chase for the rest of my life. But as the cigarette was extinguished, so was the dream. Transcendence would have to wait.

I woke in my hotel bed the next morning, ate breakfast, and walked around San Francisco some more, until the inevitable could be delayed no longer.

A seabag on my shoulder, a suitcase in my hand – at 19 years old, I lugged my possessions the quarter mile or so from the East Gate of

Alameda Naval Air Station on the east side of San Francisco Bay to Pier 3 and the *USS Coral Sea*.

Thus began my over three-and-a-half years of life on the ship.

The berthing area, where the Radiomen like me lived, was a long, narrow space with two long rows of racks (bunks), three high. There was a small aisle – about the width of a doorway – between them; 70 men living in an area smaller than the size of a high school classroom. We lived on the level right below the flight deck, so the flight deck was our ceiling, and when the jets landed, the berthing space vibrated from the impact, which sounded like an explosion. The arresting wires on the flight deck caught the jets by the tailhook that hung from the aircraft. Then, when the aircraft came to a stop, the arresting wires snapped back into place like a rubber band and jarred the berthing area again. Because the individual racks had about as much space from the mattress to the rack above our heads as there is from an adult's elbow to the tip of the middle finger, there was no way to sit up in the racks. I figured that my rack was about the same size as my coffin would be when I was laid to rest.

I also figured that, between May 1979 and December 1982, when I was stationed on the ship, we probably spent about half of that time at sea. One sea period was for 102 consecutive days, another for 79.

I made good friends on the ship, but for much of my time, especially my first six months before we deployed overseas, I preferred to explore the places we visited alone.

I would walk and walk and walk when we were in port – exploring around San Francisco or Oakland or Berkeley or San Diego. Navy pay was low for an E-2 or E-3 (a lower echelon enlisted man), but it didn't cost anything to walk if I was broke. Anyway, doing anything outside, away from the Navy, was preferable to being on the ship, broke or not. When I did have money, I still walked all over the place, but I would often stop in a restaurant or a café, where I would read until my eyes couldn't stay open anymore. Then I would order coffee and read some more. I would write till I couldn't hold my pen anymore, then I would go back to reading till I could write again. I would go to cheap Greek restaurants, cheap Filipino restaurants, cheap Korean, Polish, and Italian restaurants, Chinatown in San Francisco, Chinatown in Oakland,

Japantown  . . . I taught myself how to use chopsticks. I taught myself how to read Shakespeare and James Joyce. I taught myself the physical layout of the Bay Area and what buses and trains to take to get to Golden Gate Park, the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, and the Red Vic Movie House in the Haight. I learned how to read a book standing up at Cody's Books in Berkeley – in five installments, three chapters at a time. I learned to stomach the coffee in Zim's restaurant, corner of Market and Van Ness, San Francisco, open 24 hours. The coffee notwithstanding, it a good place to be alone and write and listen to the dialogue coming from the hookers, pimps, homeless, pensioners, and cops that inhabited the place late nights/early mornings – much of the dialogue in the form of soliloquy. I learned to avoid the portals of McDonald's and Burger King: "Through those portals pass souls on their first step into the bowels of Hades," I wrote in one of my notebooks.

I wrote about the homeless people I talked with, the mural on the building next to People's Park in Berkeley depicting Vietnam, the Free Speech Movement, demonstrations, riots, the National Guard, and a hungry hippy in San Francisco bumming change. The murals on Telegraph Avenue in Oakland and Berkeley, the murals in the Mission District, the graffiti in Berkeley bathrooms: "Question: What genocide program took 500 years and 100,000,000 lives? Answer: The genocide of Native Americans by Europeans." "You think you're alive, but we're really just on Channel 7. Guess what happens when they change the channel?" A free concert in People's Park on a Sunday afternoon. A homeless man I'd struck up a conversation with who told me he'd been raised by wolves. Five minutes later, I saw him running wild toward people sitting on the grass as they listened to a Jimi Hendrix clone who smoked a joint as he played "Foxy Lady" on his guitar and a chick with a shaved head sang. The wolfman got down on his hands and knees and howled after the people scattered. Later, I saw the same wolfman in Mendocino; he was in the midst of a soliloquy until he interrupted his conversation to tell me he remembered me from People's Park and could I “spare some change?” A woman on the phone in Mendocino in a bookstore talking about people's skewed concept of time as I waited and waited to pay her for *Writings and Drawings* by Bob Dylan. Moonies on Market Street. The shipmate from Virginia with tattoos on his chest, going through people's dungarees in the berthing area, looking for money to steal; another shipmate and I crossing the border into Tijuana during one of our port visits to San Diego. He was getting laid with a Tijuana bargirl while I was waiting for him in the bar downstairs,

drinking beer, watching another bargirl striptease on stage. "Don't tell my wife," he told me, after he was done. Later, we ate lunch and a pretty waitress served us. "Do you think she understands English?" he asked me. "Do you speak English?" he asked her. "No," she said. "I love you," he said. With her blush, she betrayed that she was lying. She did speak English.

Back on the ship, we slept in fits and starts while at sea, with general quarters – a drill in which we had to man battle stations – interrupting the little sleep time we were allotted. Quotes by Herman Hesse, quotes by Norman Mailer, quotes by D.H. Lawrence, quotes by Henry Miller, quotes by Boris Pasternak, quotes by Abraham Lincoln and Jesus of Nazareth. Passages from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *National Geographic*, the *New York Review of Books*, *Time* magazine, the small press and student newspapers of the Bay Area. My sexual fantasies, perversions, obsessions, compulsions, hang-ups, fears, and frustrations. All this and more, I dutifully recorded in my notebooks.

Some of the books I read were Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales and Poems*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*, and George Orwell's *1984*. In addition to these well-known works of literature, I read books by rock musicians: Bob Dylan's *Tarantula* and Patti Smith's *Babel*. I also read William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*; then I re-read it – three times.

One day, I went to City Lights Books in San Francisco and bought *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. I took it to the cashier, paid for it, and then went to the café across the alley. There, I immersed myself in the book, as I tried to ignore the slings and arrows of the other patrons' comments about the intellectual emptiness of soldiers and sailors.

*

I remember only one woman who seemed to accept me as a human being during my first months stationed on the *Coral Sea*, rather than prejudging me because I was in the Navy. She worked as a counterperson in a café I'd stopped at on Columbus Avenue in North

Beach. Not sure what espresso was, I ordered it to find out, and she gave me a tiny cup filled with thick, dark brown coffee.

“Is that all?” I asked.

“That’s the way it’s supposed to be,” she said.

I sat down and took a sip. It was bitter as hell and I came back to the counter and told her so.

“Most people drink it with sugar, cream, or a lemon peel,” she told me.

I looked at her dishwater blond hair and green eyes and my heart began to warm a degree – after having come in from the cold San Francisco wind. When I detected the stirrings of a smile coming from her face, I reciprocated.

I guessed her age as a few years older than mine. She commented on my Navy peacoat and asked me if I was in the Navy. I told her I was.

“My father was in the Navy too,” she said. “He was a chief.” [5]

Just then, a group of tourists came in the door and she had to wait on them. I wished I’d been able to talk with her, but I never got the chance. I had to get back to the ship for watch, after drinking the espresso and writing a few haiku. The ship pulled out to sea to begin a four-week training period the next morning. I thought she would have made a nice friend, but I never saw her again.

*

I read *The Outsider* by Colin Wilson, in which he describes the Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky keeping notebooks where he wrote anything that came to his mind, trying to transcend through his writing, and writing like a madman. Indeed, Nijinsky did go mad – or at least that is what society labeled him, but I admired him for having the courage to be different from what was expected of him and tried to emulate his writing technique. The French poet Arthur Rimbaud said that a poet becomes a seer by undergoing a compete derangement of the senses. All of this I tried to do, both in my writing and in my life away from the

ship. I probably wrote more prolifically my first year in the Navy than I ever had in my life. In Radioman school and since being stationed on the *Coral Sea,* I had filled up several notebooks. At first, I used the light blue Navy notebooks sold in the Navy Exchange on base. Then, I began to buy spiral notebooks in stores off base and write in them. I didn't really have time to organize my thoughts and write essays or stories. As I mentioned, I tried to follow Vaslav Nijinsky's method of writing anything that came to mind. Jack Kerouac and the Beats said one should write without editing, letting one's mind run free and wild. William Burroughs said one should not concern oneself with storytelling or plot. Life does not move in a linear fashion, he said, and neither should one's writing. "There is only one thing a writer can write about: what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing," was a quote from Burroughs that I wrote down at the beginning of one of my notebooks. Much of my writing came out as garbled gobbledygook, but some of it was worth keeping and there were times it was humorous. I liked to think that what I wrote was intense. Most of what I wrote I called poetry, but there might not have been a name for it.

The *Coral Sea* was scheduled to begin a deployment to the Western Pacific in November 1979. In the military, you are allowed 30 days of leave (vacation) per year. I took ten days' leave and decided to spend five days in Michigan, then return to Northern California and spend a few days in Mendocino, a small town and artists' colony on the coast, north of San Francisco.

I collected all my precious writing and the 40 or so books I had bought and read since being stationed on the *Coral Sea*, put them in my Navy issue seabag, and checked it as baggage for my flight from San Francisco through to Grand Rapids. When I got off the flight in Grand Rapids, I found that my seabag had not arrived, and I reported it as missing to the airline. I also found that a group of Iranians had taken over the US Embassy in Tehran.

A few weeks later, when I was out at sea, I opened a letter from my mother. "The airline says they can't recover your seabag and that it's probably stolen," she wrote.

I fell to the deck, holding my head in my hands, moaning, as the *USS Coral Sea* prepared itself for war.

*

My father began asking me to lend him money after I had reported for duty aboard the *Coral Sea*. I can't recall how much it was I lent (though I know it was at least a thousand dollars, perhaps thousands of dollars). I didn't question him; I just gave him what he asked for. I felt that helping him out I proved I was a responsible, independent adult. In the back of my mind, I guess I thought I was also buying my freedom from him. I was wrong: his manipulative, bully personality didn't change.

[1] The Japanese tend to emphasize how "small" their country is, and thus, by inference how "weak" and inconsequential it is in the geopolitical arena. I then often point out that the United Kingdom is actually much smaller in both area and population than Japan, yet its influence has been immense. It is then that the Japanese tend to change the subject.

[2] During another discussion at the dinner table, I asked my father why we were in Vietnam. He gave the domino theory explanation (which is what President Johnson and the other architects of the war used to justify our role in Vietnam: if we didn't stop the evil of communism in Vietnam, then it would spread to other small countries).

By that time I'd already asked my mother who we were fighting in Asia, while having another look at the map. I asked her if we were at war with China. She did her best to explain that there was a civil war in Vietnam (not China) and we were trying to help the "good" people. I asked her if those people were in the north (as apparently they had been during the US Civil War). She sighed and told me, "No. We're on the side of the south." As it turned out, Vietnam was another "small country" – like Japan and England – that had an immense impact.

[3] I'd fasten a die onto a big stationary metal plate on the press, start the machine, and place a piece of cardboard onto another big moveable metal plate beneath the stationary metal plate. The lower plate would come up onto the die, whereupon the die would stamp cuts and folds on the piece of cardboard. Then I'd take the cardboard out, place it on the stack of pre-cut pieces on my left side that I'd already put through the machine, reach for a fresh piece of cardboard on the stack on my right, and repeat the process. I had to be careful not to get crushed to death between the plates.

[4] His words, not mine. He really did use the word “Jap.”

[5] Chief Petty Officer. An upper echelon enlisted man, who has normally been in the Navy a minimum of 13-14 years.

## Part II: The ocean and the shore

## 8. The other side of the world

In December 1979, we pulled into Pusan, South Korea – my first overseas port call. I remember gazing at the islands off the coast and at the mountains of mainland Korea that jutted up out of the sea like huge rocks as our ship pulled in. The sun was beginning to rise and its rays framed the scenery in a way I thought romantic.

South Korea's president, Chung-hee Park, [1] had just been assassinated by the head of the country's CIA in October 1979, and the country was under martial law. A *coup d'état* took place in the country on the day we left.

But geopolitics was not foremost in my mind as we climbed out of the boat that took us from the ship to the shore. We went to Texas Street, which was filled with a lot of American-like bars where American-like bargirls tried to cater to us in fractured English. Though I wasn't ready to make love with a prostitute, I danced with one – only the third or fourth time I'd danced in my life. She was quite beautiful, with black hair down to her shoulders, and – except for the *kimchi*/garlic smell on her breath – a sweet, pure scent emanated from her young body. Somebody threw coins in the jukebox and I left my inhibitions at the table as she led me to the dance floor. As The Beatles sang "Ticket to Ride," I made up moves. I think I did a pretty good job: The Funky Pelican, The Flying Turtle, The Sprinting Octopus. I felt like a goldfish riding a bicycle by the time my bargirl stepped on a cockroach with a "crunch."

The song ended and I ordered a vodka and orange juice. My bargirl asked me to pay her "bar-fine," so I could take her out of the bar for the night, but I declined. Although she was a beautiful woman, the beauty added to my fears. I didn't want to fall in love with beauty, only to end up discarded and alone on the western shores of the Pacific Ocean. And anyway, I didn't have enough money to pay her bar-fine.

So instead of spending the night with her I rented a cheap room for myself near the bar.

"You wan' girl?" the middle-aged woman who took my money at the hotel asked, looking up from her meal of rice, *kimchi* and meat, as she sat behind a partition. "No. Just the room," I told her.

"You no wan' girl? You sure?" she asked.

"No wan' girl, wan' alcohol," I told her. So, shortly after I entered the cold, gray room with its torn, faded yellow curtains, she came back with a bottle of Korean *soju* – a drink stronger than wine, but weaker than whiskey. I pulled out the *won* (Korean currency) I had in my pocket and she took what was needed to cover the bottle. I sipped the bitter liquor as I wrote in my notebook for an hour or so, trying to compose poetry. After I'd finished half the bottle, I heard something scurry across the floor in the hall. I opened the door to find it was a rat. When it saw me, it scurried into one of the other rooms that had its door ajar. I returned to my room and fell into a deep sleep on that cold December night. When I woke up several hours later, I went to the bathroom and found someone had vomited in it. Then I returned to my room to find two rats in the corner making love. I grabbed my things, went outside, and bought some meat on a stick that a street vendor was selling. The meat tasted sweet and I thought it was spiced beef, but after I ate it, another sailor walking by told me I'd just eaten dog.

I made my way down the street, not sure of where to go or what to do, until I looked to the hill west of the city. I decided to climb it. I spent 20 minutes or so climbing what seemed to be an interminable number of steps that seemed likely to lead me to my hometown on the other side of the world if I continued on them. I then turned back toward the city and the Pacific waters beyond. As I did so, I recalled that someone on the ship had said you could get opium-laced wine in Korea easily and legally. After having read William Burroughs and listened to the Velvet Underground song, “Heroin,” I'd become intrigued by opiates (though my interest was tempered with fear), and I decided to look for that magical wine.

The Orient was an exotic place in my mind. The combination of China, Korea, Buddhism, and opium, along with a little *kimchi* and *soju* (but hold the dog meat, please), offered something to me that seemed an alternative, though perhaps not an answer, to my dissatisfaction with Midwestern Catholicism, Calvinism, hot dogs, and Budweiser.

It was my last day in Pusan and I decided that, in addition to a glass of opium wine, I would try to find a Buddhist temple as well. (It might be good to hedge my search for vices with a visit to a house of God, I reasoned.)

But, in Pusan, I never did partake of the opium wine, nor did I find a Buddhist temple. Instead, I found the biggest sailor I'd ever seen from the ship as I turned a corner. He was looking for a restaurant that served hamburgers. Though I wanted to be alone, he recognized me and I couldn't think of a way to shake him. He found a restaurant and ordered. I sat down, resting from my long walk, and lit a cigarette. He took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves to reveal a tattoo on his right forearm – an "X" covering the faded name "Lucy" – and what appeared to be a mermaid bearing the name "Jenny" on his left forearm. He commented on how the hamburger tasted strange. I thought it might be dog but didn't tell him. While he was eating I drank two cups of tea and looked out at the harbor, where I saw our ship anchored.

After three days in Pusan, we patrolled the waters of the Sea of Japan [2] and the East China Sea before hitting Subic Bay in the Philippines.

Walking to Olongapo City from Naval Station Subic Bay, we crossed a bridge over what both Filipinos and US sailors called "Shit River," a river that made an impression on the olfactory nerve just as its name would suggest – because it was full of raw sewage.

But as we crossed Shit River, I saw the most beautiful woman in the world on the other side. She was smiling as she turned her face from me, and her white, slightly crooked teeth and sparkling brown eyes remained in my mind's eye. Her dress blew softly against her legs in the sultry breeze as children in boats on Shit River called out for "*Piso*! *Piso*!" (the Philippine currency). But the farther I walked toward the woman, the farther away from me she moved. Since that day, I have often chased after the vision of that woman, but she has so far evaded my grasp.

After 18 days in the Philippines, we pulled out of Subic Bay, went through the Straits of Malacca, and headed to "Gonzo Station" in the Indian Ocean; this was January 1980. We then spent 102 days at sea, without a port call, off the coast of Iran. Our jobs as Radiomen required

us to work 12–16 hours a day, every day. Messages never stopped coming or going, so there was always a backlog of work. I made copies and filed messages, making sure that all the immediate and priority messages were at the top of the stack, and I called up the departments the messages were addressed to in order notify them. I also had to do field day (sweeping and mopping the spaces). During the mid-watches (the graveyard shifts), I would stand up for hours without a break, copying messages on a Xerox and distributing them in cubbyholes marked with the 30 or so different departments on the ship. Standing up for hours without a break caused my whole body to ache, from my heels to my brain, as I began to develop sciatica.

As I had when we were in port in the US, I also read as much as possible at sea, though our free time was extremely limited. A tiny ship's library was located on the deck below the hangar deck – near the enlisted mess decks – and I would often go to that library when we were in the Indian Ocean. The collection of books in the library was mostly pulp fiction, but there was a good collection of *National Geographic* magazines that I immersed myself in, reading the long articles. I also read the long articles and interviews with people like Joseph Heller, Bob Marley, and Ed Koch in the issues of *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler,* and *Oui* that were sold in the ship's store. The library was staffed by a guy that blared “corporate rock” cassette tapes in his portable stereo throughout the day, thus making it difficult to concentrate on the reading and writing I did, but I managed nonetheless.

I tried to keep in shape while at sea, but because of the small amount of space available in our berthing area, it was not easy to do calisthenics. Nevertheless, by positioning my body so that my arms fit into the narrow spaces between the sets of racks, which were set perpendicularly against both the bulkhead and the narrow passageway that ran the length of the berthing area, I was able to do push-ups and sit-ups. After I finished those, I would go down the ladder one flight to the hangar deck, find a small, unoccupied space (which was not easy, given that the *Coral Sea* had over 4,000 men on it [3]), and jump rope, sweat falling from my body like rain in the extreme humidity of the Indian Ocean.

Thirty push-ups, then beginning F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; forty sit-ups, then beginning Franz Kafka's *The Trial*; stretching while standing up – crossing my legs then bringing my palms to the floor and

remaining there for thirty seconds – then beginning Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, writing poems of unrequited love, Grand Rapids, San Francisco and Shit River, then beginning Jack London's *Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*; trying to draw pictures of the demons that visited me in dreams and in real life, then beginning George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and going on to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and books of poetry by Emily Dickinson, Dylan Thomas, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti; writing letters to the one or two friends I thought I had, writing letters to Mom and Dad that I rarely sent, writing letters to Magdalena, the girlfriend I'd made in the Philippines, which I could never seem to finish, then reading bits and pieces of Marcel Proust, William Blake, T.S. Eliot, Homer, and Milton; jumping rope – three sets of a hundred, then reading W.B Yeats' "The Second Coming" and the Book of Revelation in the Bible again and again, and then trying to write my own versions – again and again – in my notebooks. More writings by William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Allen Ginsberg, more work in the radio shack, more flight operations, storms at sea, men falling overboard in the pitch black of night and then miraculously rescued by the helicopter we would launch; general quarters drills followed by an hour of sleep; walking on the flight deck one day and seeing a whale, listening to an ex-Marine from Grand Rapids in our division telling us about when he had to eat rats in Vietnam in order to survive in the jungle.

*

One day at sea, I had to go lower antennas around the perimeter of the ship with another Radioman before flight operations – so the view from the planes wouldn't be obscured as they approached the ship to land. That day, after working at the task for a while, my partner and I went to where the last antenna we had to lower was located – behind a jet. He walked behind the jet, which unbeknownst to us had its engine on, and the air pressure from the exhaust of the plane blew him overboard. As I looked at him, just a few feet from where he'd been blown off – as helpless to save him as he was to save himself – he seemed to be floating in space, like one of the pictures I'd seen of astronauts floating in space in *Life* magazine.

What were just a few seconds seemed like an eternity as he was swept beyond the flight deck, over the catwalk and off the ship. I ran to the nearest person I saw and yelled "Man overboard!" while pointing to where he'd been blown off. The sun was bathing the skyline and the

ocean in all the colors of the light spectrum. The cold wind whipped against all of us on the *Coral Sea*, but the energy of the wind was mixed in with the energy of the sun. The sky and the ocean and all of life were beautiful as he fell the equivalent of five stories into the sea, off the pendulum of life, and into the beyond.

*He's dead,* I thought to myself. *What will I tell his parents?*

The ship launched a helo, and after what seemed another eternity, he was pulled from the water, alive. Later, I went down to sickbay to see him. "Thanks," he said. He got out of the Navy soon after, and I never heard from him again.

*

When I was a kid, we tried digging to China in the dirt path behind my house that divided Grand Rapids from East Grand Rapids. Eventually, we gave up on the task, but in the Navy I made it to Hong Kong in 1982, on my second seven-month deployment overseas.

As I was walking down the street in Hong Kong, I saw a jade Buddha statue in a store window, walked into the store, and bought it. Though I had no place to display it while on the ship, I figured it would serve me well when my time in the Navy came to an end and I got my own apartment.

Soon after that, we made the fateful visit to the country that would change my life: Japan. After our ship pulled into Sasebo, Japan, on the island of Kyushu, I took the train to Fukuoka, also on Kyushu, and from there I took the high speed "bullet train" to Tokyo, on Japan's main island – Honshu. I thought the girls and the countryside were pretty, as I studied them. The train made stops in Hiroshima, Osaka, Kyoto, Nagoya, and Yokohama before reaching my destination of Tokyo. The people and places I'd known in my life as I'd searched for wisdom and love passed through my mind as I gazed out the train window at the mountains, rivers, cities, towns, and high school girls walking along the train tracks in uniforms that were modeled on those we wore in the Navy. While in this reverie, I thought Japan might be a good place for me to return to and live in.

We made another port call to the Philippines before heading back to San Francisco Bay. We passed under the Golden Gate Bridge in March 1982, ending my second and last overseas deployment in the Navy. I had visited Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan during my Navy tour.

[1] Park Chung-hee is how the name is rendered in Korean. “Park” is the family name.

[2] Known as the “East Sea” or “Eastern Sea” to Koreans – a nationalistic rendering linked to Koreans’ bitter feelings regarding being colonized by Imperial Japan in the first half of the 20th century. I choose “Sea of Japan” because that is the rendering of the name in English, though I offer my apologies to any Koreans who might be offended by this. Anyone who reads this book will probably see that, if I chose to, I would have at least as much reason to feel bitter toward the Japanese as anyone else born after World War II, Korean or not. (I have chosen to lay my bitterness aside.)

[3] Women were not yet stationed on deployed Navy ships at that time.

## 9. Out of the Navy, into the fire

The Navy wanted me to re-enlist when my active duty time was up, and I considered it but decided to at least travel across the US while I had a chance, before making the decision.

I stayed at a fleabag hotel in Oakland for two days after the ship returned from a cruise to Hawaii in December 1982, then took the Amtrak train to Chicago – a three-day trip.

I intended to visit Michigan, then move on to New York City, and go to Dallas, where a Navy buddy of mine (and a native Detroiter) lived. He had suggested I move to Dallas when I got out of the Navy. I planned to go back to California, though, and apply to college or, possibly, if I still felt wanderlust, re-enlist in the Navy and ask for duty overseas, preferably Japan.

I spent a couple of days in Chicago, staying at a cheap hotel in the Loop. I went Christmas shopping and drank at a bar, watching a comedy film I can't remember the name of about the Navy from the 1940s. I left for Grand Rapids on a bus the next night.

On the bus, I heard other passengers talking about the "bad side" of Grand Rapids, mentioning the Lime Lite Bar and D'Amico's on South Division Street, where I'd worked. I talked with a pretty woman who looked about my age, sitting next to me. About an hour or so into our discussion, I found out she was married to my former next-door neighbor, one of my childhood buddies – the one who had said the skeleton key I found in the secret stairway belonged to a ghost.

Shortly after I arrived back in Grand Rapids, my mother asked me if the family could borrow money to pay for my brother's college tuition. I gave her what she asked for – at least a thousand dollars, even though I still hadn't been repaid any of the money that my father had "borrowed" from me.

The next day, I called up an old friend from high school and went to a party, where I saw a lot of people I hadn't seen in years. Michigan had the highest unemployment rate in the country at that time – something like 20 percent – and most of the friends I talked with were unemployed.

I had no desire to stick around, just as I had no desire to stay in Grand Rapids after I'd graduated from high school.

I got very drunk that night, and as I was driving home, I fell asleep at the wheel and ran into a parked car.

The impact woke me up. I turned off my lights and began to drive my father's car the rest of the way home, but a cop car started following me, then stopped me right in front of my parents' house. The two cops questioned me about the hit-and-run. I tried to make up some story, but I couldn't hide the smashed body of my father's car from them. The cops began to frisk me as my father and brother were coming out of the house.

"Do you know him?" one of the cops asked my father.

"Yes. He's my son. He just got out of the Navy," my father replied.

After giving me a ticket that required a court appearance, the cops walked to their car. Before they got in, one of them turned to me and said pointedly, "You're lucky you're not in jail!" As they drove away, the exhaust from their car rose up into the cold, gray, unforgiving Michigan skies, and I stood on the ice-scarred asphalt, shamed in front of the father and brother I'd been helping to support with checks I'd been sending them from the *Coral Sea*.

My father's presence probably helped keep me out of jail. In a sense, I was grateful, but on the other hand, I would have preferred facing up to my responsibilities by going to jail, rather than being saved by my father. Anyway, I felt if I stayed in Michigan, it would have been like being in jail. I'd already done my time in debtors' prison, with my father acting as both warden and the prisoner with the longest sentence.

I made the court appearance and paid for the damage to my parents' car. As it turned out, the car I'd hit belonged to a family that went to St. Stephen Church, and their daughter had been in the same class as my sister, one year younger than me. Their insurance paid for the damage to their car.

*

I took a bus from Grand Rapids to Detroit on Friday, 14 January, 1983.

Detroit never recovered from the rioting in the summer of 1967, which (up till then) was the most violent domestic uprising in US history since the Civil War. 43 people died. And with the competition from Japanese automakers in the 1970s, which began with the oil embargo, things only got worse for the city.

The weather in Detroit was cold and the city was depressing. I spent most of my time drinking beer and watching TV in my hotel room, pondering what I would do with the rest of my life.

The motel I stayed at on Jefferson Avenue was a typical motel in Detroit: on its way down, in an area that had already fallen. Its one redeeming quality was the liquor store across the street, which I patronized numerous times. The beer helped to numb the depression that seeped through my pores from my surroundings. As I drank cans of Budweiser and watched the tube, I thought of the cities I'd visited in Japan – how clean they were and how decent the people who lived in them seemed. *It was no wonder the Japanese were beating Detroit at its own game of making cars,* I thought. Detroit was dirty and spiritually dead, whereas the spirit I'd felt in Japan was healthy and pure.

I went to a restaurant next door to the motel. Anemic sunlight came through the dirty window, exposing the battered lives of the pensioners, prostitutes, homeless, and helpless inside. A waitress with warts on her nose and chin placed a greasy hamburger in front of me. I opened the newspaper I used to deliver – the *Detroit Free Press* – and read about the worst economy in decades. Some people called it a recession, others a depression. Whatever it was, it was hitting Michigan and its auto industry especially hard. I made another visit across the street to the liquor store, where I picked up another six-pack of beer, placing a ten-dollar bill inside the bulletproof glass partition on the counter to pay for it.

Soon, I was in a cab on my way through the Windsor Tunnel to Canada. I took a train from Windsor to Toronto. After arriving in Toronto, I checked into a hotel and ate at a Japanese restaurant nearby. I passed numerous Asian hookers plying their trade in the cold and snow on the way back to my room (alone). It was then on to Montreal, where I arrived in a snowstorm on another train.

I spent my first night in Montreal in the French district. After checking into the hotel, I ventured outside in the snow and cold and had a good meal, then walked into a bar. After I ordered a beer, I looked at the clientele and realized it was a drag queen bar. I talked with a black transvestite who told me his goal was to move to San Francisco. He advised me to stay away from New York. I didn't heed his advice.

The next day, I went to the bus station, bought a ticket, destination Boston, and climbed aboard. The bus wound its way through snow country. I've taken countless bus, car, train, and boat rides through places as distant and diverse as Colombia, Vietnam, France, Thailand, England, Germany, China, and Japan, and have seen a lot of natural beauty and unnatural ugliness. Northern Vermont, with its mountains and Lake Champlain, was among the most beautiful. I enjoyed the stop in Montpelier, Vermont, where I bought a cup of coffee and a donut, breathed in the crisp, clean air, gazed at the snowy mountains, and considered the map of my life and where the road I was taking might lead me.

After a couple of days in Boston, during another snowstorm, I headed for New York City – my first of many trips there alone.

After arriving at the Port Authority Terminal (8th Ave./42nd St.) at night on a bus, I ventured out into the bright lights and big city. I encountered a lot of dark spots in my journey, but never got swallowed up in them. I spent most of my time on the Lower East Side/East Village, on East 9th St., one half block east of Tompkins Square Park. This was long before the "clean" New York of Rudy Giuliani; it was the New York of *Taxi Driver*, *Midnight Cowboy,* and Bernard Goetz. The World Trade Center cast its shadow on the Manhattanites in its midst as I walked out of the apartment I was subletting and onto 1st. Avenue. Andy Warhol was still with us, as was Lou Reed. People smoked marijuana openly at the Night Birds bar on 2nd Avenue and snorted lines of coke on the bar at the A/7 Club (corner of Ave. A/7th. St.), one of the many underground clubs in the neighborhood I was living in. I had to dodge the drug dealers, who openly plied their trade outside my apartment window, and I had to be careful not to step on the homeless huddled up in all corners of the city, when they weren't trying to renovate one of the abandoned buildings in the neighborhood in order to have a roof over their heads.

New York City was a beautiful, frightening, fascinating, inspirational wonderland. I made a lot of friends and had a great time, but thought I should leave the city for a while to catch my breath. So, after 18 days in New York, I headed for Washington, D.C. one night in February, by bus from the Port Authority. Arriving in D.C., I went to as many museums of the Smithsonian Institute, surrounding the Mall, as I could in two days. I saw the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and took a few pamphlets from a Vietnam veteran in front of it that claimed MIAs were being held in Southeast Asia. Then it was on to Norfolk, Virginia, by bus in another snowstorm. I spent one day and one night there, drinking with Navy sailors. After another bus ride to Daytona Beach, Florida, I found myself broke (because I couldn't get a check cashed) and had to stay at the Salvation Army one night. A friend who owed me money wired me some and I moved on to Jacksonville, then Pensacola, Florida, spending one day in each city. I arrived in New Orleans the day after Mardi Gras ended and met some friendly black guys on Bourbon Street who took me barhopping and footed the bill. Then, it was on to Houston, where I stayed a day before heading for Dallas by bus.

I had saved a lot of money in the Navy and had enough to tide me over for at least another month or two when I arrived in Dallas in February 1983.

My Navy buddy picked me up at the bus station, and after we got into his car the first thing he asked me was, "Do you want a beer?" I saw that he was cradling an open beer between his legs. That was how I found out it was legal to drink and drive in Texas at the time (though not, of course, to drive intoxicated) and, of course, legal for the passenger to drink. I took him up on his offer.

Within a few weeks, after looking hard for a job, I was offered one by Jim Moore, a Vietnam veteran and native of New Jersey. He saw on my job application that I'd just gotten out of the Navy, which sparked his interest. The company was the stock brokerage firm Merrill Lynch. They offered me a salary of $14,000 a year, which for that time was not bad for a young person without a college education. When he asked about my future plans, I told him that I wanted to go to college and was thinking of studying Japanese. (By that time, Japan's economy was booming.) "I'll pay for your college education," he said (though as it turned out, he never did).

I worked at Merrill’s Dallas block trading desk. [1]

Jim Moore had recently come from Merrill’s New York headquarters. He was a passionate, hard-drinking, exceptional trader, who seemed to swear with every fourth word he uttered.

I didn’t know anything about Wall Street but gave myself a crash course by reading as much as I could, poring through the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* and reading books like *Understanding Wall Street*.

I admired Jim Moore’s passion, hard work, and intelligence, but having grown up with a father who had been a stockbroker, who had only seemed to drown deeper in debt as the years went by, I had no plans for a career on Wall Street.

I had dreams of being a writer, filmmaker, or translator, but had not yet been able to articulate a story on paper to make into a novel or film or to learn a foreign language. So, for a time, Wall Street would have to do.

*

Besides Jim Moore, another person I admired was Mr. Hammond, my first college teacher.

I’d thought school and college were part of the system that had not served me well, and consequently, that I hadn’t served well, at least until I joined the Navy. Nevertheless, in the summer of 1983, I decided to begin taking night classes at El Centro College in downtown Dallas, close to where I lived and worked.

I took placement tests in math and English when I registered, doing well enough on the math test to be exonerated from taking the basic math classes required to graduate from junior college. After a group of us had taken the English test, a proctor immediately corrected them. When he was done he asked, “Who’s Don MacLaren?”

“Me,” I answered. “Why?”

“Because you got every question right on the English test,” he said.

“I read a lot,” I replied.

I took my first college class a couple weeks later – Mr. Hammond’s history class. One of the first things he said to us was, “Most of you are wasting your time in college. You should be traveling. You should be experiencing life . . . But since you’re here, I’m going to put you through boot camp.” He did. That class, in the autumn semester of 1983, was on U.S. history up to the end of the Civil War. Instead of using a textbook, Mr. Hammond assigned us to research material regarding historical events and the people who’d made those events happen. (Not as easy as it might seem, given that this was long before the modern Internet). We had to hand in reports, give speeches, and debate with him and each other regarding the decisions the people in the history books had made. He encouraged us to focus on individual people in history, how those individuals had thought, and what had motivated them, rather than on places and dates. He required us to keep a notebook with the research we did for the class, which he checked periodically. I spent many sleepless nights doing the enormous amount of research he required on the people involved in events like the Louisiana Purchase, the Missouri Compromise, and the Ludlow Massacre.

Mr. Hammond was a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, a union man, an admirer of Martin Luther King, and the most truly liberal person I’d met. But one thing I admired him for was his courage to be different. He told us he’d never voted for a Republican, but was planning to in the next presidential election because liberalism had failed him and Ronald Reagan was more trustworthy and courageous than any other presidential contender. I’d never even considered voting for Reagan, but Mr. Hammond made me understand that it was not only OK to go against the grain, but wrong not to when one’s convictions were at stake. In the end, I didn’t vote for Ronald Reagan, but through Mr. Hammond, I gained the faith in the American system of education I thought I’d long ago lost. Mr. Hammond also helped me gain more faith in myself, by rewarding me for my long hours of sleepless nights of research and writing: I got an A for the course.

*

After I’d been with Merrill seven or eight months, they moved me to a different department. Then, several months later, after I’d been with

Merrill a little under a year, Glen Burrell, the head of that department, told me one day, “Your position is being eliminated.”

“Why is my position being eliminated when I have seniority over two people?” I asked.

To make a long story short, the company kept me on its payroll instead of firing me, after I’d researched my options and found I was entitled to severance pay (which Glen Burrell claimed he didn’t know). I resigned and Jim Moore helped me in my job search. I found another job (though not through him) at Dean Witter Reynolds, another Wall Street firm. I worked at the over-the-counter trading desk in Dallas, which wound up paying me a little more money than Merrill Lynch had.

After almost a year at Dean Witter Reynolds, I’d had enough of Dallas and being a “Yankee.” I decided I was going to move to either New York City or the Bay Area.

In the interim, I’d moved to North Haskell Street, between Central Expressway and Ross Avenue. This neighborhood, at the time, was considered marginal at best. On one side of the street were poor blacks and on my side of the street, mostly poor Mexicans. Housing projects were a couple of blocks away. A block down the street, a tough Cambodian worked behind the cash register at the 7-11. I often made beer runs there and sometimes talked with him. Outside, a neighborhood character we called “the gas man” [1] often hung out. He was a black man who looked muscular and healthy, except for the fact that he was a gasoline addict. I’m not sure how this came to be. Anyway, whenever I saw him, he was wearing a hat that he had fashioned from a brown paper shopping bag and holding a gas can. He would punctuate the conversations he had with himself by bringing the gas can to his nostrils and inhaling a big hit. As I would have liked to have done with the guys who hung out across the street from Catholic Central in Grand Rapids and passed a bottle around as the sun rose, I would have liked to hear the gas man’s story. I never did.

Some of the other characters in the neighborhood lived in my apartment complex, which was owned by a white capitalist hippie. He had inherited the apartment building I was living in, along with a former church across the street, where he lived with his Bostonian wife. They

let their three-year-old son run around naked outside during the summer.

My next-door neighbors were two hippies, one of whom walked around on crutches because one of his legs had been cut off while he was jumping a ride on a freight train. In contrast to our capitalistic hippie landlord, he was a kleptomaniac hippie. I witnessed his kleptomania in action once at the 7-11, as I was laying a six-pack of Budweiser on the counter. Somehow, he managed to successfully fuel his kleptomania, though his disability severely limited his ability to flee if caught. I felt embarrassed for the tough Cambodian guy behind the counter, and I thought maybe I should say something, but my feelings toward my uniped hippie next-door neighbor won out. In any case, the Cambodian was busy with an irate black customer at the time.

[1] The riot started when police raided an illegal bar (a “blind pig”) in a black neighborhood, where people were holding a party for two soldiers who had just returned from Vietnam.

[1] A “block” of stock at the time I worked at Merrill in 1983 was a minimum of about 2,000 shares. Those buying or selling blocks of stock were mostly institutional investors (banks, credit unions, etc.).

[2] He was not the only gas man I have seen. There have been others who have crossed my path, from Oakland, California to Mexico City.

## 10. From the Lone Star State to the Golden Gate

In September 1984, I told my hippie neighbors next door that I was leaving Texas. The day before I left, they gave me (without me asking) a bag of good marijuana as a going-away present. I considered throwing it away, but since their intentions were good, I kept it. If nothing else, I figured it might serve as a kind of talisman.

On Sunday, 14 October 1984, I packed my things into my car and decided to head west, figuring if worse came to worst and I ran out of money, I would be better off in a California winter than a New York one. I traveled through Oklahoma City and the Texas Panhandle, cooking rice, beans, and potatoes on a grill in the middle of nowhere, with no one in sight. I witnessed the first snow of the season in Tucumcari, New Mexico, and I passed through Taos, Santa Fe, and the Grand Canyon. Throughout the beautiful desert of New Mexico and Arizona and the desert wasteland of the Mojave, road signs led to Los Angeles. I thought about it, but bypassed them and went north to the Bay Area. I completed my second trip across the North American continent on Sunday, 21 October 1984. I stopped at a 24-hour diner in Oakland, ordered breakfast at 10:30 pm, walked into the bathroom, looked in the mirror, and stared at the face looking back at mine for a long time, till I was convinced that whatever road I took was the right road. I crossed the Bay Bridge into San Francisco and slept in my car, near the Golden Gate Bridge. I did this for the next few days, until I paid for a room in a fleabag hotel in Oakland.

One night, I went to The Saloon, a bar in San Francisco’s North Beach. It was the oldest bar in San Francisco, built before the 1906 earthquake (one of Charles Bukowski's books has a photo of it on the cover). There was a band playing jazz, with an attractive woman on the saxophone. A man, who looked to be in his 50s and was dressed in a suit and tie, asked me if people could read poetry there. I told him I didn't know, but if people could I wanted to read some. I told him I was a poet.

As it turned out, there was no poetry read there, but this man and I became friends. He chain-smoked Camel regulars and read me poems as we sat at Zim's at the corner of Market and Van Ness late into the night.

I asked him what he thought of Allen Ginsberg.

"He says he's a Buddhist."

I asked him what he thought about Jack Kerouac.

"Jack spent three days at my house, drying himself out. He told me he was giving up alcohol, embracing Jesus again, and going to get back to his Catholic roots. We went to church once."

Tom Powers had been thrown off a roof when he was eight years old and suffered from ataxia, among other ailments. He walked with a cane and a wobbly gait, as if he were drunk. His wife and one of his sons had committed suicide. His two remaining children had abandoned him. He lived in the Tenderloin [1] in an SRO [2], drawing social security after losing his job as an insurance adjuster in the 1960s. He was an alcoholic, a member of AA, and constantly short of money.

As with most good friends, Tom and I fought and sometimes separated for weeks or even months. Despite the fact I could match every drinking story he told me with one of my own, I did not consider myself an alcoholic. I asked him if it was OK to drink while I was with him. He said it was. I would go to his tiny room on Ellis Street, smoke the cigarettes he offered me, and drink ale, while sitting on the floor, listening to him read poems as his transistor radio, tuned to KDFC-FM, played classical music. I'd begun to take an interest in jazz and blues when I was in high school, and I had begun to cultivate an interest in classical music in the Navy as I picked up KDFC on my radio.

"Why do you always write about hate and fear and filth?" Tom would ask me, after reading one of the poems I'd given him and asked him to comment on.

"Just look out your window, Tom."

Actually, outside Tom's window was a very narrow space between his building and another one. Below it was an alley too narrow for much of anything but rats and roaches. Nevertheless, a body was once found there.

Tom was prescribed a variety of medicines – lithium, codeine, and countless others I can't remember the names of. He often offered me samples; most times I refused.

I spent Thanksgiving 1984 alone in my skid row hotel in Oakland, eating baked beans out of a can. On Christmas 1984, I lay on my bed in my tiny room with a headache because I hadn't eaten anything at all for two days. A couple of days later, I was walking down the street when I saw someone I recognized from the Navy – a black guy who had been in my division on the *USS Coral Sea*. He invited me to drink a cup of coffee. I told him about my financial situation and he said I should have stayed in Dallas, but he lent me some money and helped me out again later. If it hadn't been for him, my time would have been much more difficult. I ran into him several more times in the Bay Area – about once a year. The last time I saw him was just before I was about to go to Japan. He worked at the Sizzler restaurant as a waiter, and whenever I went there, I gave him a humungous tip.

The move from Texas to California had been scary for me, because I didn't have a job or any connections in California when I left Texas, nor did I have much money. I hadn't told my parents I was making the move, as they would have almost certainly tried to dissuade me from doing so. That would have added to the fears I already had and perhaps tipped the scales in favor of abandoning the trip, thereby preventing me from embarking on the next step in the journey of my life.

After working the night shift driving taxis in the East Bay (Oakland, Berkeley, etc.), ferrying around passengers (who were as often as not hookers and drug dealers) for a sleazy outfit called Bay Area Cab [3] for several weeks, I found a job as a waiter at the Palladium Disco in San Francisco. I commuted to the Palladium from Oakland by the BART train (Bay Area Rapid Transit train/subway). The Palladium was open four nights a week, Thursday through Sunday. While waiting on customers, I had to carry drinks on a tray through the crowd that was packed wall to wall with people. I would go throughout the area where the tables were located (on two levels) and even onto the packed dance floor sometimes to take orders. Somehow, I managed to keep from spilling any drinks. My first night there I made good tips, but that was the only night I did.

Palladium Disco is at the edge of North Beach, an old Italian neighborhood in San Francisco, and the company that owned the disco also owned a handful of strip joints in the neighborhood.

I don't remember filling out an application for the job before I was interviewed by a guy named “Mondo.” He was a little bigger and looked a few years older than I was, with black hair and olive skin. Mondo looked at me coldly with his dark brown eyes.

"Let me see some ID," he said.

I showed him my Texas driver's license.

"Do you have a job now?"

"No," I told him.

"What are you living on then?"

"Savings," I told him.

Mondo drove a Corvette and wore suits that looked custom-made. He sometimes gave good-looking girls free drinks, and all the girls at the disco liked him. One of the other managers, a middle-aged guy in a suit that also looked custom-made, came in one night before the place opened and showed off his shooting techniques with an unloaded pistol. I recall him saying something about being in prison. People seemed to respect those guys. I never respected them, but in order to earn enough money to eat, I had to swallow my pride and work for them.

And work I did (though that particular job didn't last very long).

After the Palladium Disco, I found a job I thought was more secure. It was at The Broadmoor, a senior citizen’s residence a short walk from Japantown, where I’d spent my first night in San Francisco when I was in the Navy. I began work at The Broadmoor in December 1984 as a houseman (sweeping, moving furniture, cleaning toilets, etc.). We were given free room and board, which was taken out of our salary. What remained was a small check, which I used for spending money.

[1] One of San Francisco’s poorest neighborhoods.

[2] Single room occupancy residential hotel.

[3] I read about Bay Area cab later in one of the Bay Area newspapers. The story stated the company’s owners had tried to bribe Oakland city officials so they would overlook many of the cabs’ deficiencies, which included things such as turn signals, horns, or speedometers that didn’t work. I discovered these deficiencies the hard way – by driving the cabs.

## 11. Screenplay, transcontinental hitchhike, love, Haight, valedictorian

In autumn 1984, I ran into a guy who wanted someone to help him write a screenplay, so I offered my services. I agreed to work with him on it for a percentage, if it sold. We met once a week in his apartment in Pacific Heights, one of San Francisco's most exclusive neighborhoods, about a 15-minute walk from The Broadmoor.

He knew as little about screenwriting as I did, so I read as much as I could about screenwriting and film and saw as many movies as I could. (I found that one of the dishwashers in The Broadmoor was a film buff. He had a VCR and let me use it to watch movies.)

As it turned out, my screenwriting partner (who actually did little writing on the first draft we worked on) offered me the grand total of $300 after the first draft was finished if I would give up my rights to the film. I agreed.

While at The Broadmoor, I'd been looking for other jobs, dressing up in a suit and tie and going all over the city to restaurants, bars, hotels, stores, and anywhere else that would take my resume.

While one of the desk clerks was sick, I volunteered to work the switchboard at The Broadmoor. I did what my boss called an exemplary job at an antiquated pre-World War II switchboard, which was only partially functional, while also distributing mail, taking job applications for what seemed to be a revolving door of applicants, and tending to the residents of The Broadmoor. (Most of them were very nice people who had done well financially, but some of them were in fading mental health and tending to them was a lot of work.)

In the meantime, I had begun reciting poetry at a free writer's workshop in the Tenderloin, at open mic readings and sometimes by invitation, along with other writers. Before readings, I would practice reciting in front of a mirror, over and over, till I was comfortable about my upcoming performance.

In addition to writing, I also began to take classes at City College of San Francisco in autumn 1985, and I got some money from the Veterans Educational Assistance Program (VEAP [1]) to do so. (I'd taken a year of

college in Dallas too, at night, getting straight A’s in all the classes I took: history, English, and Spanish.)

In early 1986, I got a call from Caffe Trieste in North Beach, one of the places I’d given my resume. Iolanda, the manager there, offered me a job.

Caffe Trieste is one of San Francisco’s best-known cafes and is an icon of the Beat literature scene. It was also, like D’Amico’s, multicultural – in fact, more so. I worked with people from Hong Kong, Japan, Switzerland, France, Spain, Italy, and Brazil. American-born employees were a small minority. (The Broadmoor was also very ethnically diverse. Its residents came from all over the world, and about half of its employees were foreign-born. It was sexually diverse as well; about half of its employees were gay.)

I worked at Caffe Trieste full-time, while working at The Broadmoor part-time, which gave me free room and board at The Broadmoor. In the meantime, I thought of moving to New York City. I applied to New York University ’s film school and was accepted. But then something happened: I met Michaela.

Michaela was a beautiful African-American woman [2] who, like most of the employees at the Broadmoor, had recently moved to San Francisco from somewhere else (in her case, Philadelphia) to try her luck in the Golden State. She got a job at The Broadmoor and soon after knocked on my door and asked me if I wanted to have a drink. I did.

Within a couple months of that first drink, we were living together on the edge of the Tenderloin district, a neighborhood of SROs, Indochinese refugees, winos, junkies, streetwalking hookers, gay hustlers, ex-cons, and street people.

By that time, I had hitchhiked to New York City (in July 1986) for my third trip across the North American continent, something I’d been wanting to do for a long time. I spent ten days in New York, staying in the East New York section of Brooklyn with friends of one of the regular customers at Caffe Trieste.[3]  I also reconnected with Marla, a good friend I’d first met during my trip to New York in 1983.

Marla was an attractive Jewish woman from Brooklyn. We had met at a bar on 1st Avenue where the Rolling Stones' video for "Waiting on a Friend" was filmed. I had bought a beer just after her boyfriend had gotten up from his chair to go to the bathroom. Marla and I gravitated to each other like magnet and metal and began talking. Her boyfriend (an ethnic Irish Liverpudlian) returned a few minutes later, and we all finished our beers and went to another bar. A few days later, he and I watched the Super Bowl together in a bar on the Upper East Side, punctuated by trips to the bathroom to snort cocaine he offered me.

Marla and I had stayed in touch, and when I met her in the summer of 1986, she had a new boyfriend, Willie, a childhood friend from Brooklyn who was getting over a heroin habit. He seemed a kind, gentle soul – an atypical native New Yorker, I thought.

Working full-time at the Caffe Trieste provided enough money to live on, and Michaela and I had found an apartment on Cole Street in the Haight, between the Panhandle that juts out from Golden Gate Park and Haight Street. I began to go to school again at City College, foregoing NYU to live with Michaela, and continued getting straight A's.

However, within a year, Michaela and I had broken up and she moved to England. I moved to North Beach, near Caffe Trieste, and continued going to school.

After a conflict with Caffe Trieste over pay I felt I'd been cheated out of, [4] I walked out on them.

By that time, I was living in another apartment with two undocumented aliens on the border of the Mission and Bernal Heights.

I had enough money saved to last me a month or so, but found a job within a few days. As it turned out, the owner of the Royal Motel on Lombard Street, on the city's "motel row," was a good friend of the son of the owner of Caffe Trieste. He called his friend from Caffe Trieste, who put in a good word for me. I then began working the graveyard shift, which allowed me to do homework for the college classes I was taking and to watch movies on TV when I wasn't checking in or out customers, or doing the accounting, which had to be completed every night. The other desk clerks in the neighborhood called my motel the Bates Motel, because it looked like the motel in the movie *Psycho*.

[1] VEAP was basically a very watered-down version of the G.I. bill. In the service, one had to contribute to it if one wanted to receive it when separating from the service and going to college. And if the veteran went to college, the government would double what she or he had paid in while serving. However, the maximum one could contribute was $2,700, so the total the veteran could receive from the government was $5,400.

[2] Actually, Jamaican on her father's side, German on her mother's.

[3] East New York was (and is) a poor neighborhood of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, US blacks, and other ethnic minorities. The friends of the customer (a woman friend of mine) were Anglican brothers, who did social work in the neighborhood.

[4] A long, convoluted story. To make it short, I found out that a co-worker (an undocumented alien from Italy) with less seniority was making more money than I was, though I was told by the management that I was a great employee and they wanted me to run a new cafe they were thinking of opening. The co-worker was a friend of mine and after a shift at Caffe Trieste, we went to another cafe down the street. It was there, over a glass of red wine followed by an *espresso*, that she told me she'd asked for a raise (to equal the salary previously made by a former employee who had committed suicide a few months before). The Caffe Trieste gave it to her, on the condition that she would promise not to tell any other employees. She broke her promise when she told me. I was faced with the dilemma of either telling management I knew what she was making and demanding a higher salary than hers, giving two weeks' notice, or walking off the job. I didn't want to play the role of a character in a drama in which employees were played against each other and had to stab one another in the back to get ahead. I felt the most ethical thing to do, despite the potential consequences, was to walk off the job. The employee who'd gotten the raise called me up the day after I walked off and told me I'd done the right thing. After that, I sometimes bumped into other employees I'd known there; they too told me I'd done the right thing.

## 12. Another transcontinental trek, Berkeley, earthquake, my friend is infected

In May 1988, I graduated as valedictorian at City College, with a major in film. I again applied to NYU and was again accepted, but decided instead to go to UC Berkeley, as it was much cheaper than NYU and an easy commute across the bay from San Francisco.

I'd finished most of my course work at City College of San Francisco in December 1987. In the spring of 1988, I worked two jobs, full-time at the Royal Motel on the graveyard shift and part-time at a restaurant near San Francisco's Financial District, saving as much money as I could. I wanted to make another trip across the continent before going to Berkeley, and by July I had saved enough to buy a 30-day Greyhound pass. I traveled from San Francisco to Los Angeles, San Diego (where I saw one of my Navy buddies), Mexico City, Matamoros, Dallas (to see the Navy buddy there again), Miami, Atlanta (to see one of my sisters), Winston-Salem, North Carolina (to see my brother), and then on to New York City again. I spent a week or so there, before making the trip by bus back to San Francisco and completing my fifth trip across the North American continent.

My first year at Berkeley, I slept in a friend's closet in San Francisco's Bernal Heights, but I had free run of the apartment we shared (along with his sister and her two teenage children). Then I moved to Oakland in June 1989, where I lived with two roommates (in the same neighborhood Huey Newton was murdered in, at the time he was murdered). I took a ten-week intensive Japanese language course at Berkeley during the summer of '89, while continuing to work at the Royal Motel, commuting to San Francisco by BART.

In September 1989, I got my own apartment – a small, cheap place on Webster Street in Oakland, near MacArthur BART station. While there, I often heard gunshots at night, once right in front of the door to my apartment, which was on the ground floor. I rolled out of bed like a cannonball shot from a cannon, hit the deck, crawled to my phone, and called "911" (to no avail, as it turned out; whoever had pulled the trigger had long since departed.)

There were junkies living next door and a housing project a few hundred feet down the street. Across the street, I could see bullet holes in the

apartment door of a drug dealer who had gotten out of prison shortly after I moved into the neighborhood.

But the danger associated with that neighborhood wasn't confined to gunshots. Not long after I moved there, the Loma Prieta earthquake hit. I was walking on the Berkeley campus, just after I'd finished classes for the day. In a perverse way, I felt glad, because after years of having lived in California, I'd never actually felt an earthquake, even when people who were in the same room at the same time as me said they had felt one. However, the earthquake turned out to be deadly, especially for Oakland. Forty-two of the 63 deaths occurred within walking distance of my apartment, on the Cypress section of the Nimitz freeway. The Marina District in San Francisco, built on a landfill near the Royal Motel, was also hit hard. Four people died there.

I was scheduled to work the graveyard shift at the Royal Motel that night, but I had no way of getting there. BART had shut down, a section of the Bay Bridge (connecting San Francisco and Oakland) had collapsed, and there was no phone service. BART was up and running the next day, and I went to the Royal Motel. I talked with the owner, who told me he hadn't expected me to be able to come in the previous night.

In autumn 1990, my last semester at Berkeley, I had an interview on campus with representatives from an English school called the American Club of Japan, based about 100 kilometers north of Tokyo. The school offered me a job and I gladly took it.

I finished my coursework for a Bachelor's degree in English in December 1990, and I lived in the apartment in Oakland until I left for Japan in March 1991.

I waited for my visa to be processed while I worked two days a week at the Royal Motel. I'd racked up a lot of debt going to college and wanted to work full-time, but the Royal Motel didn't have a full-time position open. I tried getting other jobs to tide me over financially until I got my visa, but the US was in the midst of a recession and no jobs were available for someone who was about to leave the country. Thus, I had to pay my rent and bills with credit cards, and I racked up more and more debt, on top of the student loans I had.

Though the contract I'd signed for the American Club of Japan English School was for one year, I figured I'd spend two years in Japan in order to improve my Japanese, study *karate,* and make a dent in my bills. Before departing for Japan, I visited friends and family in Michigan and on the East Coast.

My ex-girlfriend Michaela and I had kept in touch, and we had remained friends after we'd broken up and she'd moved to England. She had returned to Philadelphia by early 1991 and I stayed with her for a few days in her apartment. However, Michaela and I got into a spat on New Year's Eve in Manhattan (she'd wanted me to pay a $100 cover charge per person to get into a nightclub; I didn't want to put yet more debt on my credit cards.). One thing led to another and I wound up spending the rest of my time on the East Coast in Manhattan, renting a cheap room in a fleabag hotel.

I also saw Marla in New York City. By this time, her boyfriend, Willie, had died of AIDS. "So I'm infected," she told me.

In March 1991, I left for Japan, where I was to experience more earth-shattering trauma than I ever had in my life.

## Book II

## Part III: Japan

### 13. Hello, Japan

It was raining when the plane I'd boarded in California landed at Narita Airport, outside Tokyo, on Saturday, 16 March 1991. The $100 in US bills in my pocket was all the cash I had to my name, and I changed that money into yen when I got off the plane. I got on a bus and headed for Utsunomiya, about 150 kilometers north of Narita Airport, driving past huge factories and small plots of rice fields. I was exhausted and still hung over from the drinking I'd done my last night in the States, finishing just a few hours before my flight took off.

When the bus got to Utsunomiya, it was nighttime and snowing. Mr. Konno, the man who'd interviewed me on the UC Berkeley campus a few months previously, just before I'd graduated, now greeted me in front of the Utsunomiya JR (Japan Railways) station. He helped me with my bags as we walked to the American Club's main school, about a block away. I sat in the office for about an hour, with a terrible headache, as Konno went somewhere to do something about getting me a place to sleep. Finally, he came back and we set out for the apartment where I'd be staying. While driving me there, he asked me if I had an international driver's license, which he'd told me to get before I came to the country. "*Hai*," I answered him.

We got to the apartment and Konno, together with a slightly chubby Japanese woman secretary who'd accompanied us in another car, gave me eating utensils, some food, a blanket, and a Japanese *futon*. [1]

"A present from the American Club," Konno said, as he handed the items to me. I was very happy to get the food, since I was so low on money. He told me I'd be moving to Oyama, a city about 30 kilometers south of Utsunomiya, so the apartment I was staying in that night would only be temporary.

It's unusual to get snow in March in Utsunomiya, like we did that night, and my first night there was very cold. I tried to turn on the kerosene heater in the apartment to keep warm, but it was out of kerosene. After unwrapping the *futon* and blanket Konno had given me, I devised a

system in which I kept from freezing by wrapping a towel around my head and breathing into it. I rolled the blanket around the rest of my body. Wrapped up thus, neither my breath nor body heat could escape the combination of blanket and towel. I was therefore able to keep myself warm.

I woke up the next day at about 4:00 AM and couldn't get back to sleep. I attributed that to jet lag. I lay down until the sun came up, then lifted my body off the floor, got dressed, and took a walk outside. I saw frozen puddles of water, and I stepped on them just to hear them crunch and crack like I used to do when I was growing up in Michigan. I had about a half a pack of cigarettes left from the pack I'd bought in San Francisco the night before leaving for Japan, and I lit one while I went for a stroll in the freezing cold. The neighborhood I was in seemed to be far away from the center of the city, because there wasn't much around – some bare plots of land that I assumed would be high with rice and other crops during the summer. A few houses here and there. Train tracks about 50 meters away. A few ugly apartment buildings, like the one I was staying in. Not very pretty, but in a completely different context from the not-very-pretty neighborhood in Oakland I'd come from. It was also in the country that I'd wanted to live in for years. The dreams I'd felt in my bones on my first night in San Francisco, when I was about to check on board the *USS Coral Sea*, were still within me. I'd carried them across the ocean, and they'd brought me to Japan.

After my walk I returned to the apartment and cooked breakfast. Later, after eating it and taking a shower, I opened up the Japanese language textbook I had, and I reviewed verb conjugation and memorized vocabulary for a few hours. After that, I turned on the radio in the apartment, tuned it to an English-language station, and listened to a British journalist speak about Japanese trade policies and the problems they created with other countries.

Later in the day, I decided to try to find my way to the American Club with the car Konno had lent me. The car had a huge sign on top of it that advertised "American Club English Conversation School" in Japanese, with the school's phone number. The sign made me feel a little self-conscious. Nevertheless, I got in, started it, and drove, trying to find the main road Konno had driven me in on the night before.

After spending two or three hours driving around, I finally found the American Club, after getting lost several times and asking several people directions in my poor Japanese in the process. The last person I asked was a guy who was practicing his golf swing in the middle of a side street. He took a swing and told me it was where his imaginary golf ball would have landed. His daughter, about five years old, said "hello" to me. I thanked them, waved, and drove off into the sunset.

A few days later, Konno drove me to Oyama, where (unbeknownst to me at the time) I was to live for the next three-and-a-half years. I looked around the apartment: the *tatami* covering the floor was cut up and the walls throughout were caked with a film of dirt, as were the kitchen and bathroom floors. And on top of all this, there was no running water. Japan seemed so clean and orderly from the outside, looking only at its surface. In fact, though, some dirt inside you couldn't get rid of, no matter how hard you scrubbed.  At the same time, something as basic to life as water was turned off.

I put my bags inside the apartment and Konno took me to the Oyama American Club to meet some of the staff. One of the foreigners I met was dressed in a suit and tie, so I thought, *This is a high-class operation; I better have my shit together.* He was big, blue-eyed, and friendly. The other foreigner looked like he was Latino or a light-skinned black and was dressed in casual clothes. He seemed nice as well. I also met the Japanese secretary. I talked with the guy in casual clothes and told him about my financial situation, letting him know I'd paid for the bus ticket to Utsunomiya from Narita, but hadn't been reimbursed yet, as I'd been promised I would be when I was in the States. He got me the money.

For my first couple of years in the country, I spent nearly all my free time in my apartment alone, studying Japanese obsessively. And a few weeks after arriving, I began taking *karate* classes.

Because I didn't have any water in the apartment the first few days I was living in it, I couldn't clean the film of dirt that covered the apartment walls and I had to bathe in a *sauna* next to the American Club school in Oyama. (A *sauna* in Japan is a place where you can bathe for a few hundred yen – two or three US dollars – and should not be confused with a "sauna" in the English sense of the word.) If you wish,

you can sleep on a *futon* for the night in a Japanese *sauna* for a couple thousand yen (about $14-$15 in 1991).

After the water in my apartment finally came on, I scrubbed and scrubbed the walls, trying to clean the dirt off them, to no avail. The walls seemed to be painted with a coat of dirt that spoke of despair. And alas, despair was not to be outdone by my attempts to overcome it and wipe it away.

A couple of days later, Konno came to my apartment with a large bottle of *nihonshu* (Japanese *sake*). "A present from the landlord," he said, "for all the trouble you've had with your apartment."

I was happy to have the *nihonshu*. I certainly needed it, but I needed money more, so I asked Konno if I could borrow some. He lent me ¥50,000 (about $350 at the time) and later subtracted it from my paycheck.

[1] A Japanese *futon* serves as a mattress and blanket would on a US bed. The two pieces of bedding are placed on the floor (usually over *tatami*). A Japanese *futon* is not to be confused with what in English is referred to as a futon, which actually serves the same function as a sofa bed.

## 14. Creditors, rice and White Day

When I finally sat down and calculated my debts from student loans and all the credit cards I had, the total added up to over $20,000. I couldn't afford to go out much, and though I paid as much as I could every month to the credit card companies, it was never enough. After I had been in Japan a couple of months, all my credit cards were cancelled, and I got nasty letters telling me I was seriously delinquent in my payments.

I did my best to pay my bills, study Japanese, do *karate,* and keep my many frustrations from boiling over my first year in Japan. I felt distanced from most of my fellow teachers, but only because I tried to keep my distance from them. Most of them seemed to come from upper-middle class backgrounds and didn't seem to have had much experience in life outside of having gone to college, working at an odd job or two, then coming to the American Club to work. I was often asked to parties but did my best to dodge the invitations because invariably any *gaijin* get-together consisted of complaining about Japan – the customs, the language, etc. I thought this was a waste of time. It seemed to me if we spent our free time studying the language, culture, and history of the country, things would probably go better for us. (*Gaijin* is the word the Japanese use most often to describe a "foreigner," but many non-Japanese consider it pejorative – like "jap" or "spic" or "nigger" would be in the States. Translated literally, *gaijin* means "outside person.")

I made ¥250,000 a month (a little under $2,000 at the time) during my first year in Japan and got a ¥50,000 bonus after extending my contract the first time. Later, when I extended my contract again, I got a raise to ¥265,000, which was the level my salary was to stay at until I left the school in March 1995. Once a month, every payday, I'd buy traveler's checks at the bank or a money order at the post office, usually for between $500 and $1,000 – as much as I could possibly afford in one month. I'd mail the money to my Wells Fargo Bank branch in San Francisco for deposit in my checking account. This usually left me between ¥50,000 and ¥100,000 per month as spending money. ¥7,200 of this went to the monthly fees for my lessons at the *karate doujou* and ¥2,000 a month was for the Japanese lessons I took. This left me just enough money for electric, gas, phone, and water bills, food and beer,

and a rare night out. The American Club took my apartment rent (¥50,000) out of my pay.

I cooked my own food almost every day, bringing my lunch to work in a plastic box and eating it at the American Club. My typical diet consisted of rice, along with potatoes, onions, cheese, tomatoes, broccoli, tofu, and occasionally some beef that I'd throw in. I'd boil everything, adding some soy sauce, maybe a little salt or some spice and some butter. This was a healthy and cheap diet, except when I threw in the beef (because meat is very expensive in Japan). Most people in Japan have a rice cooker – a machine that they throw a measured amount of rice in, along with a measured amount of water and maybe a little butter or oil. Then they just push a button and the rice cooker goes to work. About 15-20 minutes later the rice is ready to eat. I, however, never invested in a rice cooker. I'd just throw some rice and a lot of water into a pot, along with a chunk of butter, and let it cook. It wasn't until I'd been in Japan for a couple of months that I found I was cooking my rice the wrong way.

The guy who'd been dressed in a suit and tie when I first went to the Oyama American Club once saw me as I was about to cook rice while he was visiting me in my apartment and told me to stop. "You have to wash your rice," he said. I didn't listen to him at first, but he insisted I wash my rice before I eat it. I was accustomed to eating Minute Rice, Uncle Ben's, or Rice-A Roni – rice I didn't have to wash.

By that time, I'd found the Japanese to be very fastidious about things I didn't think mattered very much. However, when my friend saw I wasn't washing my rice, he insisted there was a reason for it.

Japanese farmers put enormous amounts of pesticides on their crops. Japanese always peel their apples and throw away the skin because of the large amounts of pesticides on the apple skin. They also peel grapes (it's not as difficult as you might think) and throw away the skin too – something I didn't understand at first, just like I didn't understand why they washed their rice.

If you don't thoroughly wash your rice, you'll ingest a lot of pesticides. From that time on, I began washing my rice. I would put the grains into a pot, then run tap water into it and swirl the grains around a few times each way with my hand. I'd then drain the water by turning the pot to

the side and letting the water run between my fingers. Then I'd run more tap water into the pot and repeat the process a second time. After I was done, I would again run more tap water into the pot, throw in a slice of butter, and turn the setting on my gas range to "high." After heating the rice until the water began to boil, then stirring the rice with a spoon, I'd turn the heater to "low" and let the rice simmer for a good twenty minutes or so before I ate it.

When my friend first mentioned washing rice, it seemed like one of the things Japanese appear to be hung up on; things that irk foreigners living in Japan so much. The Japanese wrap things in paper more than any other people on earth. The way things are presented and the way they look is very important in Japan, but I, like most foreigners in Japan, thought all the wrapping that went on whenever I bought something in a store was a terrible waste of paper. Clerks would wrap things, then put them into a bag – a double waste of paper. After the wrapping was done, the clerk would hand me the item while holding it with both hands and bowing slightly. Often, one of the American Club students would bring an *omiyage* (a souvenir) to the American Club from a trip they'd recently taken, or just a gift that they'd bought. Usually, the *omiyage* and gifts were sweets or *senbei* (rice crackers). Even if they were a Western snack, like Ritz crackers or Oreo cookies, they were wrapped – individually wrapped, every single piece of sweet, *senbei*, Ritz cracker, and Oreo cookie.

In Japan there are unwritten rules one is supposed to observe, like not eating or drinking anything as you walk down the street, turning off your car headlights if you're stopped at a red light at night, giving gifts on Valentine's Day – but only if you are a woman – then returning the favor if you're a man on "White Day" – in March – to the woman who gave you gifts on Valentine's Day. Only chocolate is supposed to be given on Valentine's Day, while only non-chocolate sweets are supposed to be given on White Day, though any white gift – for example, white panties – is OK.

White Day came into being in the 1970s, started by Japanese confectionery companies that figured a good way to get a larger share of the candy market would be to start a tradition for men to give candy to women, to complement Valentine's Day (when Japanese women are expected to give chocolate to men). Valentine's Day and White Day, though, are not necessarily days to give something to your sweetheart.

Most of the gift giving is to friends and acquaintances and has nothing to do with affection, love, or lust. It only has to do with the Japanese concept of *giri*. (The word *giri* is usually translated into English as "duty.") In fact, the name for the Valentine's Day chocolate giving is "*giri choco*." ("*Choco*" is the short version of the Japanese word for "chocolate.") *Kamikaze* pilots supposedly felt *giri* in World War II, and Japanese still feel a strong sense of *giri* today to their co-workers, teachers, etc. *Giri* is a Japanese "rule" that is supposed to make everyone comfortable, even though there's no emotional feeling behind it. It's one of the things people take for granted to maintain a society that supposedly runs without any major glitches.

Rice, however, has nothing to do with *giri*. Rice is a fundamental part of Japanese culture that cannot be connected with any kind of Japanese cultural idiosyncrasy because rice is basic to life in Japan. Rice is a given to the Japanese, and without it, Japanese culture would die.

My rice-based diet was good, but it also have me gas, which I often released while I was riding my bicycle in what seemed to be almost constant rainstorms my first months in Japan.

## 15. The snack bar girls

When Konno had driven me to Oyama from Utsunomiya, we went to a real-estate office. He got out of the car, telling me to wait inside, which I did – for what seemed to be an interminable time – while he negotiated getting an apartment for me.

Finally, after over half an hour on a chilly day under partly sunny but mostly depressing skies, he returned. The smile on his face – like many Japanese smiles – betrayed a bit of pain, mischief, or perhaps something nefarious and “inscrutable” lurking beneath it. “There are some girls in your apartment building who work at night in bars,” he said.

I wasn’t sure if that was good or bad. Certainly, party girls held an interest for me, but I wasn’t so sure how “interesting” getting to know one (or more) might turn out to be.

I was given an apartment on the first floor. As I carried my first of two loads of possessions through the hall, I saw a pink payphone on a small table at the end of the hallway. There were two rooms on each side of the hall. Mine was closest to the entrance to the building. The phone was next to the apartment next to mine. The phone rang every night at least once or twice, and always at least once after midnight. After several rings, I’d hear the “clack, clack” of high heels coming down the stairs, then women’s voices on the phone. The conversations didn’t last too long. I was often awakened in the middle of the night by the phone. And it seemed to ring more and more often and the conversations to go on longer and longer as my time as a tenant in the apartment stretched on.

Some nights, the phone would ring and ring for what seemed minutes on end. After suffering this for a while, I’d go out to the hallway, pick up the receiver, press the hook on the phone to disconnect the call, and then lay the receiver on the table, so I wouldn’t be awakened again (unless someone replaced the receiver on the hook). Though there were other tenants on the floor, none of them did anything about the phone. I never talked with any of them, but I thought, given that I was the only non-Asian foreigner in the building, someone would try to strike up a conversation with me. I would have done so, if I were in the US, no matter a person’s ethnicity.

One tenant across the hall would play American music from the 1960s – almost exclusively The Doors and The Beach Boys – at loud volume. I felt a musical affinity with the guy, who looked a few years older than I was, but he never said so much as “hello” to me or acknowledged my existence with a nod of his head.

I once attempted a “*konnichi ha*” [1] one Sunday afternoon, but he ignored it. I brought this up with one of my volunteer Japanese teachers, wondering if my neighbors’ lack of communication had something to do with my race.

“Japanese neighbors don’t even talk with each other,” she said. “It’s not racist.”

Indeed, in my years in Japan, I rarely had a conversation with a Japanese neighbor, and I didn’t see any of them talking with each other either.

*

After a short time in Japan, I found there were many young male Mormon missionaries. They were easy to spot because, in addition to being Caucasian foreigners in Japan, they would be dressed up in black slacks and white shirts with ties. They would ride bicycles on their way to their next proselytization appointment, while wearing bicycle helmets.

One late morning after *karate*, as I was about to walk outside to go to work, I heard people outside my apartment parking their bicycles. When I opened the door, I heard two young men speaking in English and laughing. One of the snatches of conversation I heard was “ . . . the crazy bitch . . .” It was two Mormon missionaries in the hallway, in front of the pink telephone, about to ascend the stairs. I couldn’t think of anywhere else they would be going but to one of the snack bar girls’ apartments. By their mannerisms, it didn’t seem like it was to proselytize.

After I’d been in the apartment two or three months, I heard someone banging on one of the doors upstairs one night. The bangs became more and more insistent. This went on for several minutes (long after the time I would have concluded, if I’d been doing the doing the

banging, that it was time for me to leave, given that the person residing in the apartment either wasn't home or wasn't going to answer the door). The bangs were punctuated with yells from a man that – like the banging – also became more and more insistent. Soon, this guy was yelling at the top of his lungs. I debated going up there to tell him to shut up and wondered why anyone else in the building hadn't done so already, given that they were Japanese.

But actually, that was probably the reason no one did anything – because they were Japanese.

I started getting worried. I had been told that Oyama had a large *yakuza* [2] presence. After several more minutes of this, I heard the man yell (what I thought was) one last time and his footsteps descend the stairs.

*Geez, glad that's over*, I thought, then went back to reading the novel *Kokoro* by Natsume Soseki.

But it wasn't over. A couple of minutes later I heard someone ascend the steps and the door-banging began again, with more yells, progressing to screams. I thought of grabbing the knife in my kitchen and demanding the guy leave. *But what if he also has a knife?* I thought. I was semi-paralyzed, unable to decide whether to move outside and do the "right thing" or protect myself by doing nothing.

*And why the hell isn't anyone else in the building doing anything?* I wondered.

Soon, I heard some more noise – metal on metal, which lasted a couple of minutes. Then I heard what sounded like a door opening and the man screamed again, but this time a woman screamed in reply.

"*Itai*! *Itai*!" (It hurts! It hurts!) cried the woman. This went on for a couple more minutes. I was going to go for my knife, but decided to call the police instead. "And why the hell isn't anyone else doing anything?" I said again, this time out loud.

I dialed "119," the number for police and medical emergencies in Japan, and in my halting Japanese tried to explain the situation. If my

explanation wasn’t sufficient, I was sure the person I was talking to could hear the screams coming from upstairs.

By this time, I was literally in fear for the woman’s life, as she was apparently being hit and dragged down the stairs. I prayed the cops would get there in time.

The cop on the other end of the line seemed to get the gist of what I was saying in Japanese. I knew that at least I did a good job of pronouncing my address.

By the time I hung up the phone, the woman was slowly but surely, it seemed from the screams, being dragged farther and farther down the stairs. Within a couple of minutes, I heard her being dragged past my door and outside. Soon, I heard a car door opening and closing, then the car’s engine being turned on. And a minute later, the car was gone.

A few minutes later the cops arrived. Too late.

I opened my window and told the cops I was the one who made the call and tried to explain as best I could (in my halting Japanese) what had happened. A few minutes later, they left.

About 20 minutes later, a car arrived and I heard the same gruff male voice I’d heard screaming at the girl earlier. Footsteps up the stairs. Several more gruff words from the male voice. I was afraid he was checking to see who had called the cops. I considered calling the cops again, but the man was gone before long.

In all this time, none of my neighbors had made so much as a peep.

I slept fitfully that night.

The next morning, I cautiously walked up the stairs and checked the doors to all the apartments. When I got to the top floor, I found one of the doors’ handles was missing. I assumed the man who had come the previous night had taken the door handle off with a tool and gotten the girl.

I was glad I hadn’t attempted to make contact with any of the girls when I’d moved into the apartment.

*And what the hell was the story with those two Mormon missionaries and the snack bar girls?* I wondered. I never found out.

[1] "*Konnichi ha*" means "Good afternoon" in English.

[2] *Yakuza* are the Japanese equivalent of the *mafia* in the US. Oyama is a rather small city, smaller than Grand Rapids, but it has a *shinkansen* ("bullet" train/super express train station). I thought this odd, given Oyama's small population. But *yakuza* are rumored to have a big hand in construction projects in Japan, such as the one to construct a *shinkansen* station in Oyama. *Yakuza* also have a big hand in snack bars and other *mizu shoubai*.

## 16. Not “just an English teacher”

When I read and read and read as much as I could about writers when I was on the *Coral Sea*, I learned that most of those I admired – Ernest Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, D.H. Lawrence, Yukio Mishima, Jonathan Swift, Anthony Burgess, etc. – spoke (or read) at least one foreign language or traveled extensively, or both. I wanted to learn a foreign language and travel too, thinking that if I did so I might find my way into a world other than the one I’d examined (and didn’t want) in Grand Rapids.

As for learning a foreign language, I figured studying Spanish would be the best choice, given that there is a large Latino population in California, and it would be the language I’d be exposed to more than any other. I was also fascinated with Chinese and Japanese (at least partly because China and Japan are about as far geographically and culturally from the Midwest as I could get) and because of the Bay Area’s large East Asian population. I often heard those languages spoken. The Chinese and Japanese written characters seemed exotic and I felt if I mastered them, I’d enter the gates of a wonderful existence.

When I was in the Navy, I bought a book on Chinese writing at Cody’s Books in Berkeley and began to practice tracing some of the characters in it. I also bought a beginning Spanish textbook at a bookstore in downtown Oakland on Broadway, near the 12th Street BART station.

On one of my walks in San Francisco, I’d gone into a corner store to buy a notebook and pen for my writing. The man behind the counter had been speaking on the phone in a foreign language, which I assumed was Chinese. After he’d hung up the phone, I began talking with him. He confirmed to me he’d been speaking Chinese and told me he also spoke Japanese, French, and Spanish. I hoped one day I could do the same and told him so. He encouraged me – one of the few people in the Bay Area who treated me well, despite the fact I was in the Navy. But like the blond woman who’d served me my first *espresso,* I never saw him again. Later, I read in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that the owner of a corner store had been murdered in a holdup. It stated he was Chinese and spoke Japanese, Spanish, and French, in addition to English and his native Mandarin. From the description and the address where the holdup took place, I knew it must have been that nice man who’d

encouraged me to study languages. I wrote about this in the notebook I'd bought from him, with the pen he'd sold me.

By the time I'd graduated from UC Berkeley, I'd taken two years of college-level Spanish and could speak and read the language pretty well, good enough to travel through Mexico and get along fine without speaking a word of English. I'd also taken a year of Japanese, so by the time I arrived in Japan, I had a basic vocabulary, knew basic grammar, and could read *hiragana*, *katakana,* and at least a couple of hundred of the Chinese *kanji* characters.

However, I was an awfully long way from getting a job as an interpreter or translator, so I was confined to working as an English teacher in Japan, which I felt was far from an elite job. Many people in Japan think anyone who can speak English can get an English teaching job in the country. I had worked very hard in college, I had experience in corporate life in the US, and I felt I was capable of more than being "just an English teacher" in Japan. In any case, the English teaching I did took quite a bit of energy. During the course of my years as a teacher in Japan, I taught people of all ages and levels and traveled around by train nearly every day through the Tochigi/Ibaraki areas to teach at companies, branch schools, and private *jukus*. [1]

When I was in negotiations with Mr. Konno about my living and working conditions, I told him I wanted to go to a Japanese language school where I'd study everything, including *kanji*. I also told him I wanted to study *karate*. He promised me he'd put me in a city where I could do that.

However, upon arriving in Japan, I found that, in fact, he had not followed through on his promise. I reminded him of this and he gave me an "unhh" response.

When he took me to register at the Oyama City Hall, shortly after I moved to Oyama, he saw a pamphlet lying on a counter advertising Japanese lessons given by volunteers. He picked it up and handed it to me.

Later, I called the number, and in halting Japanese told the woman who answered the phone that I wanted to take lessons. She gave me the address and time, and I arrived at a community center.

Despite my motivation, I found that many, if not most, people actually didn't want me to speak Spanish in the US or Japanese in Japan. Despite the criticism of Americans' lack of foreign language skills and lack of interest in foreign cultures, most of the Latinos in the US would answer me in English when I spoke to them in Spanish (even when my Spanish was better than their English). What was just as annoying was Americans getting upset at me for speaking in Spanish. People told me I was rude, that I was "white" and should "act white," that I was "showing off." I had never expected so much resistance and outright animosity from people over my attempts to speak a language other than English. I had studied extremely hard and became frustrated and discouraged that my efforts seemed to get me nowhere near another world I'd felt existed. In fact, it seemed I'd gone to another world, but it was no better than the one I'd worked so hard at escaping from in Grand Rapids.

I spent countless hours alone studying Japanese in my Oyama apartment, going over vocabulary, grammar, and writing out – over and over, till my hand ached – Chinese *kanji* characters, sitting at the small *chabudai* [1] folding table I put on my *tatami*. Nevertheless, my efforts often seemed for naught.

I thought it strange, surreal really, that in Japan it was frowned upon for a foreigner to speak Japanese. I concluded that if I had East Asian features, I would have learned Japanese at least twice as fast because many Japanese would have assumed I was Japanese and would have spoken to me in their language initially, rather than in English.

I figured I would have been much better rewarded if, instead of devoting countless hours and enormous energy to learning foreign languages, I had devoted that same time and energy to studying chemistry, nuclear physics, computer repair, or auto mechanics or learning to play a musical instrument. It seemed sometimes that the harder I studied foreign languages, the more people resented it, whereas, conversely, I imagined the harder I studied the other disciplines noted above, the more benefits I'd reap.

When I began to study Japanese once a week at the community center, a ten-minute bicycle ride from my apartment, there was a Japanese-Peruvian [3] woman in her 20s who studied with me. Two classes were

held at the center: one for absolute beginners and one for more advanced students. She was much more advanced than I was, but we were put together. Her mother had been a Japanese teacher in Peru.

I would do my best to study and keep up, but sometimes I lagged behind in the homework assigned (partly due to the fact I was working full-time). She would laugh when I made a mistake or didn't understand something. The teacher ignored her laughter, and I did my best to ignore it too, though many times I was on the verge of telling her, "Would you please stop laughing at me?"

In the course of that class, I found out that a Japanese language proficiency test is given every December. It has four levels – level one being the highest, level four the lowest. One day, the Peruvian woman's boyfriend (also Japanese-Peruvian) came in to observe the class. He talked to the teacher a little about the Japanese test and the four levels.

"Level four is easy," he said to the teacher, then continued as he pointed (but didn't look) at me, "He's level four." The implication was that his girlfriend was a higher level (which was of course true), but the offhand way he referred to me and the way the teacher and his girlfriend went along with it bothered me. I felt I was being denigrated. It was almost as if they were talking about someone who wasn't even there.

I decided then that I was going to do everything I could to pass the level she was going to take: level three. The test was a few months away.

But these times when Japanese people's indifference and offhand insults spurred me to prove them wrong were often punctuated with intense depression. I knew (and had learned shortly after beginning to live in Japan) that I would never be taken seriously as a human being in the country. I would always be a *gaijin*.

What made it worse was when Japanese people told me, "We Japanese like white people." I'd recall the times I'd been refused service in Japanese business establishments, and sometimes brought this up, but I was either ignored or else the Japanese would quickly change the subject. This implied that they liked "white" people more than "other" people. Sometimes, it was explicitly stated rather than implied. There were several times when a Japanese person would ask me extremely

leading questions regarding a racial and national hierarchy: “Don, we Japanese like white people and American people. We think white American people are the best in the world – next come the Japanese, then under us there are the other Asians, and then the ‘other’ people. So you must really like Japan, right?”

These comments absolutely sickened me. I have always hated being judged on race or nationality, whether it be accusing me as a “white person” of being guilty, if only in an oblique way, for all the evils in human history, or (as seemed to be the case when the Japanese presented me with this conception of a racial hierarchy that was supposed to make me feel “good”) as “white people” being at the top of the pile of humanity.

*Why can’t I or anyone else simply be judged on actions?* I would ask myself, or sometimes ask out loud to Japanese people. My question was almost always met with silence or a change in the subject of the conversation.

And I certainly did not feel good that Japanese would look at the world with such racist eyes and assume that I had the same view! I could only conclude, after barely scratching the surface of the concept of race in Japan, that if that’s how Japanese looked at the world, then they really didn’t like me at all. In fact, they absolutely loathed me – because of my ethnicity! And that Japanese way of thinking made me loathe Japan.

And yet . . .

Naturally, I was interested in the women of Japan, but I found it extremely difficult to make contact with any of them without having to go through the step of being their private English teacher in order to get to know them. Though I had come to Japan on a working visa, to teach English, I had every intention of learning as much about Japan as I could when I wasn’t working. I figured I had to master the language in order to begin to do so.

Nevertheless, sometimes I’d get so frustrated with how I was treated in Japan that I considered giving up on learning Japanese. I’d developed both a love and a loathing for the culture – and as time went on, the loathing seemed to vastly outweigh the love.

Often, when I encountered a Japanese person whose motive wasn't to use me as a living English-teaching machine, I was treated indifferently, sometimes outright rudely. Once, after work one night, I went to a bar (we got off work at 9:00 PM) and opened the door.

"*Gaijin dame*!" ("No foreigners allowed!" – or literally, "Foreigners/outside people, no good!") the woman behind the bar said insistently. Another woman inside echoed her words. I complained to them in Japanese, but they ignored me and one of them quickly made her way to the door to shut it in my face.

I figured if they were such racist people, I wouldn't have a very enjoyable time in their bar, so I got on my bicycle and rode home, picking up a couple of beers on the way. This was only one of several similar unpleasant experiences.

In my first year or so in Japan, though, there were times when I wished I had known more of the Japanese language. Sometimes Japanese people would start a conversation with me (in Japanese) and I'd talk with them for a while, only to become lost as to what it was they were talking about. I'd utter a few words in Japanese. "*Sumimasen*, *watashi ha nihongo amari dekimasen kedo*." (Sorry, but I don't speak Japanese very well.) However, they'd continue talking away at a mile a minute, as if I'd been born, grown up, and reincarnated in Japan.

This was especially true in my *karate doujou*. My *hanshi* [4] didn't speak more than a few words of English and would talk on and on about the nuances and history of *karate* and how it applied to life. I'd only catch bits and pieces at first, but in time, over the course of three-and-a-half years, those bits and pieces became more of a complete whole and eventually I was able to fit them all together.

After studying intensively, mostly by myself, I got what I thought was a dream job after four years in the country (and after engineering a lawsuit for three months in withheld wages – more on that later), as a writer and translator for a trading company in Tokyo that imported products. Trade issues had been on the front pages of US newspapers for years, with American businessmen and politicians complaining about what they thought was a closed Japanese market for foreign products, while the American market was open to Japanese products. So, I felt

working for a company in Japan that imported products was an important job – and far from being “just an English teacher.”

But, as you’ll see later, that job was not without its pitfalls.

[1] A *juku* is a Japanese cram school, usually for students preparing for college entrance exams.

[2] A *chabudai* is a table about a foot high, with folding legs.

[3] There were (and still are) many Japanese Peruvians in Japan. Because their ancestors came from Japan, they were eligible for long-term residency visas (as opposed to foreigners like me, who had to renew visas yearly). Many Japanese had immigrated to Peru, Brazil (there were – and are – many Japanese Brazilians in Japan as well), the US, and Canada in the early part of the 20th century, during a period of rapid population growth and corresponding poverty in Japan.

[4] “*Hanshi*” is a word that implies a higher ranking than a “*sensei*.”

## 17. The Iranians

The closest I came to combat in the Navy was when we were off the coast of Iran during the Iran hostage crisis. In April 1980, a Top Secret operation began – an attempt to rescue the 52 American hostages held in Tehran – and my ship, the *USS Coral Sea*, was one of those participating in it. The mood at that time suggested we were likely going to war and once, in the middle of the night, our ship went to a live general quarters for a couple hours. The next day, the newspapers reported that a rescue operation had been attempted but aborted in the Iranian desert.

My feelings at the time were that if the US had engineered a *coup d'etat* against a democratically elected government in Iran, [1] supported a leader (Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi) who willfully violated human rights, and allowed him in the US for medical treatment, then it was only natural for Iranians to hate us. Bullying, whether it be of people or nations, was not ethical behavior and I was ashamed that my country was associated with it.

Nevertheless, I certainly didn't think taking Americans hostage in the US Embassy was civil behavior, and I felt we should do all we could to free them. I read news reports about the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, thinking it was good to throw off the yoke of an abusive bully leader like the Shah, but I didn't believe that replacing bullies with others just as bad was the answer to the country's problems.

Before I'd moved to Japan, I'd known a few Iranians in California – refugees from the Islamic regime. They'd seemed to be fine people. I had no idea that I would see Iranians in Japan, much less as many as I saw. They seemed to be everywhere.

Sometimes they would nod at me in what seemed a friendly way as we passed each other on the street or saw each other in the train stations. Most foreigners in Japan feel a connection to each other, whether English teachers, factory workers, construction workers, or one of the many Thai and Filipina women who worked in the *mizu shoubai* of snack bars, massage parlors, etc. in the 1990s.

However, I rarely talked with any of them. Most foreigners – American and otherwise – who wanted to make a connection seemed to want to speak English, assumed I was lonely (as they often were) and needed foreign companionship – and hated Japan. This was usually not the case for me, and when it was, I already had a small network of foreign friends. Anyway, I preferred to spend time with Japanese outside of work.

Iranians had developed a bad reputation among the Japanese. Many of them were in the country illegally and working at the "*San K*" jobs – jobs that were *kitanai*, *kiken*, *kitsui*, (dirty, dangerous, difficult), like construction or factory work. There were reports of them selling drugs and harassing women – some of the reports were verifiable. Many of them hung out around Ueno station in Tokyo and sold illegal telephone cards. [2] I was approached a few times by Iranians trying to sell the illegal cards, but I never bought any.

One night, after an American friend and I had seen a movie, followed by dinner and drinks, we went to Yuki station in Ibaraki, near Oyama, to catch the train home. We were a bit tipsy. A few Iranians were gathered together in front of the station. We started talking with them, in both English and Japanese, and the conversation proceeded the way conversations between foreigners in Japan almost always proceed: "Where are you from? What do you do in Japan? How do you like it here? Do you know where I can get a job?"

They told us the last train had already left. My friend and I were contemplating taking a taxi home, but the Iranians offered to let us stay in their apartment. We took them up on their offer. My friend called his (Japanese) wife and told her what had happened.

After we arrived at the Iranians' apartment, the conversation changed to what life was like in Iran. One of the guys had a long scar on his right arm. He said he'd gotten it in the war with Iraq.

I told them about my time off the coast of Iran during the Iran hostage crisis. We seemed to develop a good rapport.

The conversation turned to Japanese women. One guy said he thought Japanese women didn't like foreigners, but said he'd had sex with a few

of them “after they either took my money or I gave them English lessons.”

Many of the Iranians in Japan didn’t drink because of their religion, but there were some exceptions. One guy pulled out a fifth of whisky and offered us drinks, which we accepted. Another guy cooked Iranian food – a rice dish. It was delicious.

After a while they offered us *futon*s and we slept on the *tatami*. My friend and I got up early the next morning and were preparing to take the train back to Oyama. “But what about breakfast?” one of the Iranians said. We politely declined because my friend’s wife wanted him back early.

“Well, I’ve changed my opinion of Iranians,” my friend said, as we walked to the station. As we were about to enter it, one of the Iranians arrived on his bicycle, huffing and puffing. He held out my friend’s glasses.
“You forgot these,” he said.

We thanked him. Later, one of them called me on the phone one night, but we never met again. He called my friend too and his Japanese wife answered the phone.

“I don’t like Iranians,” she said. “I don’t want them calling here anymore,” she told my friend, and he told me that after that they never did.

After I’d been in Japan a couple of years, the police cleared out all the Iranians who used to congregate in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo. I walked by there one day and there were some young Japanese people handing out leaflets in Japanese, English, and Persian, protesting the police treatment of Iranians. I was happy to see Japanese people were taking a stand, but they were an extreme minority in Japan. The vast majority of Japanese I knew hated Iranians – except when they bought their telephone cards.

And one day I woke up and all the Iranians were gone.

[1] The democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown in a CIA-backed coup in 1953.

The geopolitics of this situation are tied in with Iran nationalizing its oil companies and the influence of Iran’s communist party, Tudeh, which supported both Mossadegh and the Soviet Union.

[2] In Japan, the use of public phones could be paid in cash or with telephone cards that could be purchased at kiosks and convenience stores. There was a magnetic strip on them that kept track of the number of minutes used. The strip on the card was altered illegally and the card was sold.

## 18. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test and Japan 101

In December 1991, I took level three of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, given by the Japanese government, and passed it. I had to have functional ability in everyday conversations and be able to read at least 300 of the 2,000 or so Chinese *kanji* characters the Japanese use in their language. After passing that test, I began to study for the level two test, which has about 1,000 *kanji*. I spent nearly every waking hour (when I wasn't working or at *karate*) going over *kanji*, memorizing vocabulary, and drilling myself on grammar.

Naturally, I memorized vocabulary like days of the week, greetings, etc., but I also memorized vocabulary necessary to understand Japanese culture: words like *honne*, *tatemae*, *giri,* and *ninjo*. Most foreigners don't learn these words during their time in Japan, though these words are fundamental to any understanding of the country.

In Japan, there is a dichotomy between *tatemae* (the stated situation in a human relationship) and *honne* (the true situation in a human relationship) as there is between *giri* (duty towards one's group) and *ninjo* (following one's own desires). There are reasons for this dichotomy, most of them having to do with Japan's political history. For most of its history, Japan was a loosely confederated nation of fiefdoms, with feudal lords, or *daimyo*s, competing for power. To survive, their subjects often had to hide their feelings when they did something as mundane as greet someone on the road or as grave as fight in battle. Similarly, the *daimyo*s had to hide their feelings when in negotiation with, or at war against, another fiefdom. But these concepts were not confined to the political arena; rather, they penetrated all aspects and layers of personal relationships in Japan. And they are as relevant today as they ever were.

In Japan *tatemae*/*honne* and *giri/ninjo* have probably played more important roles than the equivalent of these phenomena in any other society in history. I believe that this, more than any other reason, is why Westerners often (mistakenly) call Japanese inscrutable.

However, it wasn’t in a textbook that I learned these terms. It was in Karel van Wolferen’s *The Enigma of Japanese Power*, which I began reading shortly after arriving in Japan. The book distilled Japan’s history,

culture, and politics for me, and to this day, it remains the most comprehensive book I've read on Japan.

Other words I learned had to do with the social classes in Japan (which many Japanese today tend to deny the existence of). In descending order, they were the *kouzoku* royalty, *bushi* (*samurai*) warriors, *noumin* farmers, *koumin* craftsmen, *shounin* merchants and the lowest class – *burakumin* – who performed such tasks as cleaning up after executions. *Burakumin* have been historically, and still are at present, discriminated against in Japan. The *hinin*, another group historically discriminated against, includes (or included) ex-convicts and vagrants. They occupy/occupied a similar hierarchical level as the *burakumin*.

Up until recently, when a Japanese person was considering marriage, it was common for that person to investigate the background of the potential spouse (just as someone's background would be investigated before being granted a security clearance by the US government). If the person being investigated was found to be *burakumin* or if any ancestors were *burakumin*, then the marriage more than likely would be called off. Because the Japanese are meticulous record keepers, it wouldn't have been difficult to find what one was looking for in such a search. Every city and town in Japan has detailed information in the family registration of its citizens.

From the surface, the outside observer (the *gaijin*) cannot discern the social stratification in Japan that can be discerned in, for example, Latin America. That does not mean, however, that social stratification in Japan doesn't exist. It exists today, just as it always has. The difference between feudal and modern Japan is that social stratification is more difficult to discern today.

Another word I learned was *habatsu*, which means group or clique. There were the groups in the form of fiefdoms in Japanese history and there were the cliques within the fiefdoms that were constantly competing for power. Again, *habatsu*, like the words I noted above, does not only relate to historical Japan. It is just as relevant to the Japanese of today as it has been for thousands of years.

For most of Japan's history, the outside was considered *dame*, which means "no good" or "not allowed," and was rarely broached much less

bridged. Whether the outside was the fiefdom on the other side of the mountain or the lands beyond the waters made no difference; anything beyond was *dame*. Yet, in Japan, there was and still is a fascination, if not an obsession, with the dark, the demonic, and the *dame*.

## 19. Ms. Narita, kabuki, and death

I saw her at the American Club Christmas party. Long black hair glistened in the dim light. Dark skin and clear eyes perfectly complemented the smile that seemed to betray some kind of mystery lurking within her. As she smiled, I noticed she had crooked teeth, but they were clean and white and radiated health and purity. It was the only time I experienced love at first sight.

"You're beautiful," were the first words I uttered, as I stood in front of her. She returned my gaze and blood ran to her face, the resulting blush adding another dimension to her beauty. "Would you like to dance?" I asked.

She accepted. I took her hand and we spun around a little.

“I’m dizzy,” she said after a few spins.

We took a break from the spins as we held each other on the dance floor. I tried the only other dance technique I was versed in, the swaying side to side technique – in lieu of the spinning movement – which seemed to work a little more to her satisfaction.

“Where do you live?” I asked her in Japanese.

“Near Narita Airport,” she said, “and Narita Airport is where I work.”

The dance and the party ended sooner than I thought it would. Before she left, she gave me her phone number. I called her up a couple of days later.

In late December 1991, during the New Year’s holidays, the night before our first date, I went with one male and one female teacher to Yokohama, near Tokyo, where we ate, drank, shared jokes and watched TV in the vacant apartment of a friend of the female teacher. By the time I got back to Ueno station in Tokyo to transfer for Oyama, the last train had already left. So I walked out of the station, looking for a *sauna*.

It was a bitterly cold night – the coldest night for me up to that point in Japan. I walked around for twenty minutes or so, putting my frigid hands inside the pockets of the Navy issue peacoat I was wearing, clenching

my fists to warm my fingers, while the circulation flowed through my palms. I had my peacoat collar buttoned all the way up, and a beret on top of my head, keeping the heat from escaping like it would escape through the chimney of a house with a fire going in the fireplace during a Michigan winter. My ears were frozen, but as soon as my hands warmed up, I'd cup them over my ears. Breathing into the collar of my peacoat kept my face warm enough, just as I'd kept my face warm my first night in Utsunomiya by breathing into the blankets I'd wrapped around my body.

I finally found a *sauna* and told the clerk I wanted to spend the night.

"*Gaijin dame*," he said, telling me foreigners weren't allowed. He crossed his forearms in front of his chest and flashed a *tatemae* smile as he did so.

I turned and walked out without a word, though I felt like kicking him right in the face.

I walked around some more, bought some hot *nihonshu* from a vending machine, and drank it to try to keep myself warm. I also tried keeping myself warm by smoking cigarettes, inhaling the heat of the tobacco smoke deeply into my lungs. After a long walk, I sat down at one of the portable *ramen* noodle stands set up near the station and ordered a bowl of very hot *ramen* and a cold beer to wash it down. When I finished my meal, I went to the station's entrance, but it was closed. Homeless people congregated outside the doors, some of them wrapped up in blankets and sleeping, others huddled together in circles drinking *nihonshu* and smoking cigarettes. Standing there just made me feel colder, though, so I went walking around again until the first train was scheduled to leave in the morning. I arrived in Oyama at about 7:00 A.M. and tried to get a few hours of sleep before my scheduled noon date with the woman I'll call Ms. Narita.

As before any date, I was a little nervous. I tossed and turned for a while, not getting much sleep at all. When I did rise from my *futon,* I went to a flower shop and bought her roses. Shortly thereafter, we met in front of the Oyama American Club, and I presented her with the bouquet of flowers. We walked to the train station, where we had coffee in a restaurant. We talked about going to see a movie, but after asking around, we found the only movie theater in Oyama was what the

woman sales clerk at the newspaper stand in the train station said was “a dirty one.” Visions of the Travis Bickle character in the film *Taxi Driver* played through my head, in which he takes his date to a porno theater their first night out, whereupon she soon walks out on him. I didn’t want to recreate any scenes from that film with Ms. Narita.

After some more discussion, we decided to go to Oyama's amusement park, having concluded there really wasn’t any other place of interest to go to in Oyama. Though it was winter, we figured we could eat in one of the indoor restaurants or go to *karaoke* in the amusement park complex.

We got on a bus. A Brazilian couple were the only other passengers. They asked in English if the bus was going to the amusement park, and I said, “Yes.” I heard them speaking in Portuguese, and asked them in Spanish where they were from. They told me and we had a short conversation: “How long have you been in Japan?” they asked me.

“Nine months,” I told them.

Then they asked, “Do you like it here?”

I gave my version of a *tatemae* smile, followed by a thoughtful sigh and a “Well . . .”

They gave me the same answer when I asked them the same question.

“What language are you speaking?” Ms. Narita asked me in Japanese, looking at me with warm, dark-brown eyes and moving her fingers along the pleat of her white coat with her left hand, holding her flowers in her right.

“Spanish,” I told her.

“How many languages can you speak?” she asked.

“Well, I speak a little more Spanish than Japanese,” I told her. Then, after a pause, “ . . . and I also speak a little English.”

Her lips parted and she laughed through her white, crooked teeth.

The bus continued through the cold streets of Oyama, past the reinforced concrete buildings that look exactly like all the other reinforced concrete buildings all over Japan.

Throughout my travels in Japan, I saw little difference between one city and another. They all looked the same, with the same type of construction and architecture wherever I went. Reinforced concrete buildings that all looked the same. Traditional Japanese architecture that all looked the same. Temples that all looked the same, outnumbered by shrines that all looked the same. The only exception was in Kyoto, which seems to have fewer reinforced concrete buildings than any other major Japanese city.

For the most part, I couldn't discern any more spiritual beauty in Oyama or any other city in Japan than I'd felt in Grand Rapids. But I thought I felt it in her.

After getting off the bus, we walked past the Ferris wheels and roller coasters into a building where we found an ice skating rink. I hadn't skated since I'd last played hockey, when I was sixteen, in high school – sixteen years before – but when I saw the skating rink, I thought I'd like to try to skate again. We rented figure skates and I spun around on the ice. I was one of the best, if not the best, of the thirty or so skaters on the rink. She was having trouble, though, and I tried to help her, giving her my hand. We took a break, and she bought coffee for both of us. There was only one seat open, so she asked me if she could sit on my lap and I obliged her. Her long black hair caressed my face, bathing me with a fine scent.

She gripped my arm lightly for balance. "I'm going to go to school in California in May," she told me.

I was sad to hear this news, as I'd been planning to stay in Japan another year, after my contract ended in March. Nevertheless, the months remaining until May gave us plenty of time to get to know each other. I told her I wanted to perfect my Japanese and get a black belt in *karate*, with the understanding, though, that I could conceivably accomplish those things in the States as well as Japan.

"Good for you," she said encouragingly.

By the time we finished ice skating, it was dark. We took a bus back to the Oyama train station building and drank another cup of coffee, then went down a narrow street to an *izakaya* (a bar that serves small food items, like grilled meat). There, we ate *yakitori* (chicken shish kebab) and drank *nihonshu,* while watching a TV propped up in the corner above the bar. Japanese singers were trying to imitate Michael Jackson – the lead singer was dressed just like Michael, down to the white glove. Accompanying the Japanese Michael Jackson and his backup vocalists were some very attractive young Japanese women in miniskirts. The camera panned up between their legs to get shots of their panties; this exemplified the lowest common denominator of Japanese culture to me. I went to the bathroom and began urinating that lowest common denominator out of my system. But some of Japan remained inside me, nourishing me with its fuel, circulating inside my bloodstream. There was a surface aspect of the Japanese lowest common denominator that enticed me with its silken hair and fine legs.

After a couple of drinks, we left the *izakaya* and walked out into the cold night. I put my arm around her, seeking warmth in the cold that seemed as bitter as any cold I'd felt during the 19 Michigan winters I'd lived through. She reciprocated and put her arm around me. Our lips met, and the cold quickly thawed. I accompanied her on the train three stops down the line from Oyama. We sat down and kissed again, reluctantly letting each other go when we stopped at Koga station, about a ten-minute ride from where we'd set out. I carried her scent on my skin and her taste in my mouth back home with me.

Along with the sweetness of women and life, I'd carried the bitterness as well. Throughout my life, I'd dutifully carried the cold my father had brought with him back home in Detroit. It was a constant in my life and it had accompanied me to Japan. But the warmth of life and of love was just as strong as the cold.

The spirit of my new girlfriend, Ms. Narita, was the warmest I'd encountered in the cold since that snowy Michigan night when I'd kissed my soon-to-be girlfriend for the first time in the parking lot of our high school. But my high school girlfriend was to leave me cold. And though I was warmed by a special heat that night in Japan, I also felt that cold from my old girlfriend, along with all the other manifestations of cold. But it didn't bother me. Instead of detracting from life, it added to it. The hot and cold aspects of human beings throughout history –

beginning long before the ground had been broken for any reinforced concrete buildings in Japan – swirled around me in the wind, combining to form a broth I partook of as I tasted the still-warm remnants of Ms. Narita on my lips.

I sped home from the Oyama train station on my bicycle.

When I walked into my cold apartment, I turned my heater on full blast, jumped up and down, did push-ups, sit-ups, and just about every other kind of exercise I could think of to stem the cold. After the blood began flowing, I lit a cigarette and listened to the Doors' "Light my Fire" on my Sony Walkman. I could still smell her scent on my skin, so I didn't wash my face or bathe before going to bed.

I began to consider how things might go for me if I left when my visa was due to expire in March and went to America with her.

We met a couple of weeks later, on an uncommonly warm Monday in January; our plan was to go to one of the museums located in Ueno Park (a large park in northeastern Tokyo). When we got to the park, though, we found that the museums were closed on Mondays. We bought canned tea from a vending machine and sat down on a dirty park bench to watch dirty pigeons and crows walk around the dirty concrete and pick through garbage on an overcast day with a lot of positive ions in the air.

Then she told me she was leaving for America in three weeks, although she'd originally told me she'd be going that May. She asked me to translate a document she'd received from the junior college in Los Angeles she was planning to attend and I did my best, in my limited Japanese.

A friend of mine had suggested we take the Tokyo monorail out to Haneda airport, because it was supposedly a good way to view the city. The view was all right, but the feeling between us was uncomfortable. Any conversation that took place seemed forced. There seemed to be a metallic feeling in the air. How different from when we'd ridden that train from Oyama to Koga!

We got to the airport and watched a few jets take off. None of them were going too far away, because it's Tokyo's domestic airport. The jet

exhaust and noise aggravated the metallic feeling in my bones. The air had a metallic, mechanical smell, its toxins gradually building inside us with each breath we took. I felt if we stayed there too long we'd get nauseous. Though it was an uncommonly warm day for January, it felt much colder than the last time we'd met.

She still looked the epitome of beauty, with her long black hair and dark, soft skin. She put her handkerchief to her face, trying to block out the poisons in the air as we watched jets take off. I looked at her, seeking out her eyes, but as soon as they met my gaze, she turned from me, seeking something else amidst the gray clouds and black jet fumes. The spirits of the cold had distracted her and I'd become an untouchable.

Watching the jets take off, I recalled my years on the *Coral Sea*. No matter how far we were from the mechanized, metallic hum and churn of Michigan 's factories, the dirt, noise, and headaches surrounded me and everyone else on the ship. This pain and ugliness crept into us from the jets that took off from the flight deck and all the other machines on the ship that kept it afloat. Though I sometimes went above decks to watch flight ops, doing so only reminded me that I couldn't escape, no matter how far across the ocean I might sail. And I'd journeyed across the ocean once again to find the most beautiful woman in the world standing in front of me, gazing into my face – but inaccessible. The pendulum of my emotions had swung from warm pleasure to painful cold.

*

A week or so earlier, my mother had written me a letter saying she wanted to visit me in Japan. I actually didn't want her to come, but a month or so later she did.

The train ride from Oyama to Narita Airport took three hours, getting me there earlier than I'd expected, and I waited for my mother in the terminal for an hour or so. It had been raining hard in Oyama when I'd left, and I was still wet from my walk to the Oyama train station from my apartment. I studied Japanese while I sat waiting for my mother, listening to dialogues on a cassette tape and following them in a textbook as I repeated the phrases out loud, but softly enough so as not to disturb anyone nearby.

After several minutes of studying, I looked up from my book and about 50 meters away saw Ms. Narita riding up an escalator. She'd cut her hair, something I'd read Japanese women do after they break up with a boyfriend. Though we were a long distance apart, I knew it was her, and when our eyes met I could tell she knew it was me.

In order to spend some time with my mother, I'd asked for a couple days off work, though my mother spent her first few days in Japan traveling by herself.

In the Kiyomizu ("pure water") Temple complex in Kyoto, there's a small pool of water. Next to it are pieces of paper that guests use for writing down wishes. After writing down the wish, you throw the paper into the pool, and it dissolves. I wrote down Ms. Narita's name in Japanese on the paper, in the hope the situation in my mind concerning her would resolve itself and thereby dissolve, just like the paper did when I threw it into the pool.

*

A couple of days later, my mother and I went to a *kabuki* play in Tokyo. We stayed there a couple of hours, taking in the stylized movements of the actors and the *onnagata*. *Kabuki* is one of the traditional Japanese arts that make Japan Japanese. The plays were all written hundreds of years ago and have been performed over and over. Like traditional Shakespearean drama, the *kabuki* plays were performed exclusively by male actors, which means that men play the women's parts. The difference is that contemporary Shakespeare productions have male and female actors, whereas the women's roles in contemporary *kabuki* productions are still played by men, called *onnagata*. (One of the *onnagat*a was the lover of the writer Yukio Mishima.)

After watching *kabuki*, we had dinner, whereupon I returned to Oyama. When I got back home, I checked my mailbox and found Ms. Narita had written me a letter. In so many words, she confirmed what I'd begun to fear. She was gone from me and, as it turned out, never to be seen again.

Letting go of people, like letting go of a drug – marijuana, tobacco, alcohol or sex – is never easy. In letting go of Ms. Narita, though, I was

lucky. Unlike other women in my past, she had done me the courtesy of telling me she didn't want me. Perhaps my tossing the paper with her name on it into the pool at Kiyomizu Temple had brought me her answer.

The next day, I got a letter in the mail from New York. It was from the sister of my friend, Marla – the friend who'd contracted AIDS. Marla's sister told me Marla had died.

I rode my bicycle around for hours through the streets of Oyama, out to a collection of rice fields, near the *shinkansen* (bullet train) tracks, then to the Omoigawa River and the woods nearby. I entered the woods and sat down on the ground, amidst the trees and brush, and looked out upon the river, from a vantage point where I was able to see people without being seen. I listened to the birds chirp, as I tried to discern whether the voice of my friend was trying to touch me from the other side of death. I stayed until the sun set, said a prayer, and returned home, as the wind swept away the tears rolling down my face.

## 20. Ms. Shinto

Life isn't about winning, transcending, joy, love, or happiness so much as it’s about losing, pain, sadness, and learning how to go on, how to get up the next morning, and how to will yourself to live, despite all reasons to the contrary, and despite the failure and negativity of those all around you. Or is it? To be honest, whatever it’s about, I hadn’t learned. Perhaps it’s something neither I nor anyone else can articulate, though many throughout human history have attempted to do so.

I looked for the woman of my dreams in all the women I saw, but she’d slip away whenever I thought I’d found her. Anyway, we often settle for second best. What we’ve been led to think of as heroes, heroines, and heroic deeds are for movies and novels. They are the extraordinary. But it is the ordinary we choose to live in. The heroes, heroines, and extraordinary rarely appear in life, and when they do, we often as not do not want them, because they scare us.

*

I was still in mourning over Ms. Narita and Marla when I met a woman at an American Club party who studied at the school. She told me she worked in a Shinto shrine, so I’ll call her Ms. Shinto. We exchanged phone numbers, and she called me a day or two later. I tried speaking with her in Japanese, but as most Japanese did when talking with me, she insisted on communicating in broken English. She invited me to a concert, but I told her I couldn't go.

Shortly after meeting her at the party, I heard from another teacher that she had a boyfriend. I didn’t want to risk my livelihood at the American Club by going out with her, given that being deep in debt, I needed the job. The American Club contract I signed stated relationships with students were to be “kept on a social, not a personal level" and I had paranoid visions of getting fired if her boyfriend discovered we’d gone out.

Later, when I’d see Ms. Shinto at the American Club, she indicated she was unhappy with her boyfriend. I didn’t pursue the matter, considering it territory best avoided.

*

A year or so after I met Ms. Shinto, she signed up for one of my classes at the American Club. It turned out she was the only student in the class. The class went well and at the end of it she said, "I want to go to your house and see you sometime."

At a Christmas party a few months before, she'd told me she wanted to dance, but just as she said it, her boyfriend came to the table after a visit to the bathroom. Our dance was not to be.

Shortly after that, she told me she was planning to get married. "But I don't want to get married," she said, running her fingers down her cheeks, as Japanese women do, feigning tears. "I'm sorry," she added. But I hadn't had any relationship with her, other than that of student-teacher, so there was no reason to tell me she was sorry. I was to find what she was really sorry about was the fact that, given the social customs and circumstances in Japan, she wasn't allowed to make a decision regarding who she was going to marry.

She came to my house the last Monday in March 1993. I cooked lunch for her and we talked. We looked at the map of Japan on my wall, and she pointed out the place on the Izu Peninsula, southwest of Tokyo, where she and her mother had gone to an *onsen* (a hot spring). As we stood next to each other, I reached for her and caressed her face. We embraced, melting into each other. We knelt down and gradually descended the rest of the way to the *tatami*-covered floor. Raindrops splattered gently against the window, as I felt her heart thumping hard inside her chest.

But she was planning to get married. Thus, I felt the kiss we shared was really a kiss of death. Nevertheless, I wanted the kiss so badly I didn't care if it killed me, so I kissed her again.

We recounted our life stories to each other that day as we lay on the *tatami*. She began coming over regularly, and we imbibed in each other more.

*

I was afraid of Ms. Shinto. Giving myself to her meant a responsibility that was hard for me to either accept or renounce. She had a boyfriend

she was supposed to marry, and initially I thought being with her was wrong. Not only would it hurt her fiancé if he knew about it, but it was bound to hurt me in the long run too, because I knew from the outset I would lose her. But as time went on and she and I continued to make love through several long, sultry summer afternoons, I concluded what was really wrong was that she was going to marry someone she didn't want to marry. It was right for us to fall in love, and if she decided she didn't want to marry the man her parents and her fiancé's parents had decided she should, then so much the better.

When she told me she'd refused sex with him since the time she and I had first kissed, I decided I wanted her all to myself or not at all. Since she said she didn't have any desire to get married, and if given a choice she'd marry me, I decided I had to do the right thing – for me, for her, and for her fiancé. I told her either she had to leave her fiancé or I was going to leave her. And as an alternative to marrying him, I suggested she marry me.

About a month later, she came to visit me and told me she had no choice but to get married to her fiancé. "*Nihonjin dakara* . . ." (because I'm Japanese), she said through her tears. Light brown strands of hair fell from her face as she lit a menthol cigarette, while we sat cross-legged on the *tatami* of my apartment. She also told me she was going to have the formal Japanese engagement ceremony, called the *konyaku*, between herself, her fiancé, and their two families, a few weeks hence. (A *konyaku* is a ceremony formally binding a couple together in an agreement to get married, though Ms. Shinto had agreed to marry months before the *konyaku* took place). She'd tried to put the *konyaku* off, but the pressure from her fiancé, his parents, and her parents was too great, and they refused to allow her to defer or delay.

"I'm sorry," she said, and left, brushing her hair from her face and slowly bringing the strands behind her shoulder. Once she'd closed the door, I looked out the window at her car driving off, then at the stars her car headlights had obscured. After a few minutes, I heated a small porcelain container of *nihonshu* and – despite the heat and humidity – sat down on the *tatami* and slowly drank it while writing a few pages in my diary, trying to describe what had transpired between Ms. Shinto and me in the last few preceding weeks. I lay down, my eyelids becoming heavy as fireflies appeared and disappeared outside my window. Soon I was asleep.

*

She had met her first boyfriend when she was 18 and they were in love until the end. In fact, they were still in love when I made love with her.

He’d died in an automobile accident not long after they’d taken each other’s virginity. Later, Ms. Shinto met her future fiancé, who had looks and a name similar to her dead boyfriend. It was as close as she could get to the one man she’d loved, so she accepted him when he came to her.

"But you are completely different from my boyfriend who died," she told me. "I love you because you're you."

*

After over two years in Japan without leaving the country, I asked for and was given a two-week vacation by the American Club. I went to the US.

I attended a friend's wedding in Los Angeles, went to San Francisco, where I visited friends, then headed to Michigan to visit family, where I observed that my parents' marriage hadn’t changed. They hated each other. Why was it I hadn't married by my mid-30s? At least part of the answer lay in what I’d learned – or rather, hadn’t learned – through my parents. They hadn’t been able to show me how to love or be loved by another person.

*

Ms. Shinto was waiting for me at Narita Airport when my flight back from the States arrived. Though she’d decided she was going to stay with her fiancé and get married to him (even though she didn't want to), she drove me home. On the way there, she told me she'd had her *konyaku* when I was gone, thus making her engagement official. When I got home and opened the door, there was a stale, musty smell that escaped from my apartment, as if a part of my life had decayed, rotted, and died. I put my bags inside the door and she left.

I was exhausted after the flight. I opened the windows to try to air out the apartment and went to sleep.

*

A few weeks later, she called me up and asked if she could see me. We made a date for her birthday, and the morning of her birthday, I bought flowers for her. She rang my doorbell, but before I answered it, I put the flowers I'd bought for the occasion in the middle of the *tatami*-covered floor of my room, sticking a birthday card in them and closing the *shouji* (sliding door) between my room and the kitchen. I let her in the front door. She wore a red dress, with her brown hair up the way I liked it. I told her to open the *shouji*, and she did as instructed. She saw the flowers and reached for them, her eyes moist with tears. Then she reached for me.

We lay down on the *tatami* and made love.

*

A few weeks before Ms. Shinto was scheduled to get married, she invited me to her wedding. At first, I planned to go, but after thinking about it, I concluded it was unethical for me to attend because I didn't want to give support to a marriage I didn't agree with – the reason being she didn't want to get married.

She'd invited another guy, a teacher at the American Club who made it known to everybody that he was in the Marine Reserves.

I told her over the phone I wouldn't go to her wedding.

"But I wanted you to sing a song with Mr. Marine Reserve," she told me, through her sobs.

I told her I couldn't do it. I didn't know what else to say, so I just hung up the phone.

At Japanese wedding receptions, it's traditional for guests to either make a speech or sing a song, *karaoke* style. I felt rather turned off at the thought of singing on stage with the only other *gaijin* present, as if we were on display like performing seals.

## 21. My friend, the Rolfer in Tokyo – from Grand Rapids

The Los Angeles riots in the 1990s were worse than Detroit's in the 1960s. During the LA riots, I was on vacation, along with most of the rest of Japan, for the "Golden Week" holidays [1] in late April and early May. I read about the LA riots in the *Japan Times*, the major English-language daily in Japan I subscribed to. I also read an article about Rolfing. After I read it, I picked up the dictionary I'd brought with me from Oakland and read this:

"*Rolfing n. A technique of deep, often painful, muscular manipulation and massage designed to relieve both bodily and emotional tension. [After Ida Rolf (d. 1979).]*" [2]

*

I got my first Rolfing session during the Los Angeles rioting from a man who'd grown up in – of all places – a suburb of Grand Rapids. He'd been raised Christian Reformed, a very strict version of Calvinism which has many adherents in Western Michigan. But, as he had distanced himself physically from Western Michigan, he'd also put a spiritual distance between himself and the Christian Reformed religion, eventually abandoning it altogether.

Each Rolfing session lasts about an hour and a half and concentrates on a different part of the body.

*

The day of Ms. Shinto's wedding in October 1993, I went to Tokyo to get my tenth Rolfing session. After it was over, I went to Harajuku, a district in Tokyo where young Japanese gathered every Sunday and played rock music. The police would block off streets, and you could see band after band playing just about every kind of Western pop music known, as well as Japanese pop music (which is all modeled on Western pop music). As I saw a group of five different Elvis look-a-likes dancing in the street, I imagined it was just about the time when Ms. Shinto and her fiancé were exchanging vows. Or maybe it was when I was scheduled to sing *karaoke* with the other *gaijin*.

From that day until I took the level two Japanese Language Proficiency Test in December that year, I studied like hell – every day, as much as I

possibly could, sometimes going without any sleep at night. I'd failed the level two test the first time I'd taken it, but I felt I really had a good chance of passing it the second time. I'd memorized most of the 1,000 Chinese *kanji* necessary to know in order to pass it. I bought copies of some of the old tests in a bookstore and took some of them as practice, timing myself. A couple of weeks before the test, I seemed to be just above borderline passing.

I studied at least as hard for it as I'd studied for the level three test I'd passed two years earlier and the level two test I'd failed the year before. I quit drinking alcohol to help me concentrate and even quit going to *karate* for a month or two, so I'd have more time to study. It was as if I were putting myself through boot camp again, my sole focus being to pass the test. Ms. Shinto was lost to marriage and my thoughts of her were subjugated to thoughts of the *kanji* I was memorizing for the test.

*

By the time the test came around, I felt fully prepared, like a football player would have felt the morning of the Super Bowl.

On 5 December 1993, I went to Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, where the test took place. I felt everything was going well during the first part of the test. When we had a break about halfway into the test, I had something to eat and took a walk. While walking, I saw the Peruvian girl I'd been studying Japanese with my first couple years in Japan, at the Oyama International Friendship Society. She was taking the test too. She was with a Caucasian guy she'd been going with to a Japanese language school – a school geared towards preparing students for the test. She called me over and the two of them began speaking to me in English, which I didn't want to do because I was trying to do all my thinking in Japanese in order to concentrate on passing the test. I told them I had to go.

The final section of the test (reading and grammar) is the longest and most difficult. It was very hard for me to read as fast as we had to in order to complete the test on time, but I still thought I was doing pretty well, until I looked at the clock on the wall. I then realized I hadn't kept track of the time. I still had fifteen questions to answer, but only two minutes left. I quickly filled in the rest of the multiple choice answers

without even looking at the questions, and finished just in time. Exhausted, I walked out onto the lawn of Aoyama Gakuin University, knowing I'd done my best, but feeling like the losing quarterback in the Super Bowl would have felt just after the game. I went to get Rolfed.

*

I liked the Rolfing sessions. Not only was Rolfing good for me physically, but Lloyd, my Rolfer, became a friend, and thereby a respite from the other *gaijin*, who spent most of their time complaining about Japan and the Japanese. Lloyd was an American, born the same year as my father (1926), and a veteran of the Army in World War II. He'd been assigned to take part in the invasion of Japan in 1945, an invasion which had never materialized due to the fact Japan surrendered after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the fall of the Japanese Army in Manchuria after the Soviets had overrun it.

Lloyd alternated between apartments in Guam and Tokyo, and when I walked into his Tokyo apartment after the Japanese test, I saw a big green crystal I couldn't take my eyes off of. I thought of the jade Buddha statue I'd bought in Hong Kong, which I'd brought with me to Japan after it had occupied a place on my desk in Oakland. I fell in love with the crystal and told Lloyd so.

"Do you want it?" he asked.

"Really?" I asked him incredulously.

"Sure," he said. "I'm going back to Guam tomorrow, and it will only be one more thing for me to carry."

"Crystals are supposed to have some kind of spiritual energy, aren't they?" I asked.

"That's what some people say," he told me.

After the Rolfing session was over, I put the crystal in my bag and took the train from Tokyo to Oyama. I descended the steps of the train station in Oyama, looked up at the sky, and saw a full moon.

One month later, the night of the next full moon, Lloyd died in his sleep.

[1] A series of national holidays in Japan in late April and early May. Most Japanese businesses are closed during this period.

[2] From *The American Heritage Dictionary,* 1982, Houghton Mifflin: Boston.

## 22. The boss who “. . . was thinking about importing porno!”

One evening in early March 1994, at the Oyama American Club, Konno came in to check records of student payments.

Mr. Marine Reserve and I were teaching that night and after work was over, he asked me what I thought about asking Konno to have a beer with us. I wasn’t very enamored of the idea, but thought, *What the hell, why not?* I figured it wouldn’t hurt to spend some time with the boss outside of work, reasoning it could help add some fuel to our relationship.

Mr. Marine Reserve was a balding, bespectacled man about five years younger than I was, with the strong build that comes with marines who’ve been through boot camp. We had drunk together a couple times. He’d grown up on the East Coast, but had migrated to San Francisco before coming to Japan, and I felt an affinity for him.

So I went to Mr. Marine Reserve’s apartment on my bicycle, while Konno drove there.

We got inside and Mr. Marine Reserve gave us all Kirin beers. I said, “*Kanpai*!” toasting our relationship, as is usually done in Japanese social settings just before the alcohol touches people’s lips.

The conversation quickly turned from meaningless chatter about where we grew up to the American Club. I rarely liked drinking with colleagues in Japan, given that most conversations between foreigners in Japan consisted of how much they all hated Japan as the main course, with large side dishes consisting of gossip about students and other teachers.

I valued my free time, and any energy spent on work outside of working hours was wasted time for me. I could have spent that time studying *kanji*, reading, or working on the novel I'd begun the previous year, which had evolved to over 200,000 words of a rough draft.

Also, I was scheduled to go for my first-degree black belt (the lowest level black belt) in *karate* that summer and needed to write an essay in Japanese about *karate* as part of the test, as well as prepare myself physically. Spending time with other foreigners was often more a distraction from my life goals in Japan than anything else.

Spending time with the boss outside of working hours was not high on my list of favorite pastimes either, though I'd read before coming to Japan that it's common for employees to get together with the boss for dinner and drinks after work.

Konno asked, "What I want all American Club employees to be thinking about is, 'If you were the president of the company, what would you do to make money for the company?'"

At this time, I was waiting for my visa to be processed. I didn't want to have any conflict with the American Club (if I did, I was worried the company might decide to renege on their promise to sponsor my visa). As I sipped my beer, I regretted taking Mr. Marine Reserve up on his offer to go to his apartment and drink beer with Konno. I didn't want to talk shop, but at that point felt I was left with no choice.

"Well, I was thinking about a translation and interpretation service," I offered. And indeed, I *was* thinking about that. I felt my Japanese, though far from native speaker ability, was good enough to do some interpreting, and in fact I had already interpreted several times in social situations. I also felt that I would be able to translate documents to and from English, if I had the help of a Japanese native speaker.

Konno sighed and nodded his head as I made my offer. "You have no business sense!" he told me. "I was thinking about importing porno!"

At that time, Japan's censorship laws prohibited pubic hair and genitalia in film, so foreign porno was a highly prized item for the pervert market in Japan. [1] It was also highly illegal to attempt to smuggle it in.

Konno went on to tell us he thought illegal porno could be easily smuggled in by copying it onto a disk and hiding it inside a laptop computer. I had been planning to buy a laptop after I'd paid off a lot more debt, but for writing, not smuggling in porno.

I wanted to get back home and study *kanji*, as I'd been planning to do that evening. I was happy that Konno quickly finished his beer and said he had to be leaving.

"Remember, I want everyone at the American Club to think what they'd do if they were the president," he said, before turning to the door and slipping on his shoes.

"OK," I said. "Goodnight."

[1] Later, in the 1990s, Japan's laws on pornography were changed and pubic hair was allowed to be shown, but genitalia is still prohibited. The porno market (especially the illegal, uncensored porno market) in Japan is said to be controlled by *yakuza*.

## 23. Going bankrupt?

After beginning work at the American Club, I'd been assigned to work in various factories and family-run *juku* schools, in addition to working at four different branch schools of the American Club. In order to do this work, I took trains almost every day all over the area, from as far north as Nikko, in northern Tochigi Prefecture, to Koga, a city in northern Ibaraki Prefecture.

"You make more money for the company than anyone else," my *gaijin* boss said to me one day. "Keep up the good work!" In addition, in April 1994, I began working at an affiliated *senmon gakkou,* something similar to a two-year community college or trade school.

Both the American Club and the *senmon gakkou* were owned by Mr. Sugimoto, a big man by both Japanese and Western standards. Sugimoto was a former professional boxer and had a black belt in karate, but a different style of karate than that which I'd begun studying shortly after I arrived in Japan.

*

One day in early June 1994, Konno came into the office in Utsunomiya while we were preparing our classes and addressed me, as the other teachers and the Japanese women employed by the American Club as secretaries and student advisors looked on.

"Don, there's something I want to tell you," he said, pulling a Marlboro Red from a pack he held. "The students at IBL (International Business and Language *Senmon Gakkou*) really like your classes."

I was pleased to hear the news but too busy planning my next lesson to pay his compliment much heed.

"And one other thing. Uhh, what was it? Oh yeah, congratulations on getting your black belt in karate." He lit the Marlboro and exhaled, smiling at me as he did so.

A few weeks later, on Thursday, 20 June 1994, a very hot, humid day, I wrote my final check out to American Express. When I put my pen down, I sped past rice fields to the *karate doujou*, went through a hard

workout, sped home on my bicycle, showered, changed into my clothes, sped to Oyama train station, rode the train to Utsunomiya, then sped from the Utsunomiya train station to the American Club/IBL on my other bicycle, which I kept in Utsunomiya.

I was dripping with sweat, and the only thing that kept my spirits up was that it was payday. As I walked in the door of the teachers' office, I realized I'd forgotten to mail my check to American Express. But anyway, my credit cards were nearly paid off by that time, and I figured I could have them paid off completely by my 35th birthday, approaching in a few weeks.

Though it was payday, I hadn't yet had time to go to the bank to get my money. (Japanese companies deposit employees' pay directly into their bank accounts.) I was rather surprised when Konno came up to me as I sat at my desk, patted me on my back and asked, "How much money do you need, Don?"

"Well, the money's going into the bank today, isn't it?" I asked. He shook his head 'no' and lit a Marlboro Red.

"Tell me how much money you need," he said, before sucking in a drag from the cigarette. I was happy to see he was smoking Marlboros, knowing that with each drag he took he was helping to erode the US trade deficit.

"Well, when's the money going into the bank?" I asked.

"I don't know," he answered, Marlboro smoke exiting his mouth punctuating his words.

*

We eventually did get paid, two days late, and got paid late the next two paydays as well.

Later, I called Konno and told him I was worried about the future of the American Club because of the pay problems. I said I wanted to stay in Japan until at least March 1995, when my contract ended.

"Is there any danger of the company going bankrupt?" I asked.

“*Nani o itteiru, kimi*?” he asked incredulously, loosely translated, “What the fuck are you talking about, boy?” It was more an accusation than a question.

But he already knew what I was talking about. I answered him with silence, a common form of communication in Japan. The only thing he could think of to break it was, "If you were the president of the company, what would you do?"

"Well . . .” I stopped to think a couple of seconds. “If I were the president of the company, I would pay my employees on time," I said, as I mentally calculated the student loan debts I was still paying off (and neglecting to mention his suggestion to smuggle in porno). The calculation reached $11,000 by the time the conversation ended.

## 24. Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama

The same month our pay was late for the first time, Tomiichi Murayama became Japan's first socialist prime minister in over four and a half decades.

In 1995, Murayama made one of the strongest apologies for Japan's actions during World War II, part of which follows:

During a certain period in the not too distant past, Japan, following a mistaken national policy, advanced along the road to war, only to ensnare the Japanese people in a fateful crisis, and, through its colonial rule and aggression, caused tremendous damage and suffering to the people of many countries, particularly to those of Asian nations. In the hope that no such mistake be made in the future, I regard, in a spirit of humility, these irrefutable facts of history, and express here once again my feelings of deep remorse and state my heartfelt apology. Allow me also to express my feelings of profound mourning for all victims, both at home and abroad, of that history.

Building from our deep remorse on this occasion of the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, Japan must eliminate self-righteous nationalism, promote international coordination as a responsible member of the international community, and thereby advance the principles of peace and democracy. At the same time, as the only country to have experienced the devastation of atomic bombing, Japan, with a view to the ultimate elimination of nuclear weapons, must actively strive to further global disarmament in areas such as the strengthening of the nuclear non-proliferation regime. It is my conviction that, in this way alone, can Japan atone for its past and lay to rest the spirits of those who perished.

I had thought before coming to Japan that the Japanese would be pacifist, peace-loving people who were deeply ashamed of their country's actions during World War II. I was mistaken. I can only recall one time when a Japanese person said, without being prodded, that Japan was wrong in World War II. Discussions of the war (which were actually very few) usually focused on the suffering of the Japanese during the war, how they went hungry, how they sacrificed all their metal to the government so it could make war materiel, how they would practice with bamboo spears to repel the (what they thought at the

time was) inevitable invasion of the Americans, and how the US was a villain for dropping not just one, but two, nuclear bombs on Japan.

The high school textbooks tended to follow this line and there have been many controversies regarding their contents.

What normally happens, when any Japanese politician visits the Yasukuni Shrine [1] and makes a statement suggesting that, during the war, Japan was not the villain that most think or that Japan amended article 9 from its constitution, [2] is that the Koreans and Chinese issue angry statements attacking that statement.

[1] A shrine in Tokyo where many war criminals are enshrined.

[2] Article 9 in Japan’s constitution prohibits Japan from waging war.

## 25. Yen-dollar rate, economic crisis

Japan's economy is export driven, so it depends on a weak yen. The yen fluctuated between around 125 to 135 to the dollar from March to December 1991, my first year living in Japan. By January 1994, it had strengthened to about 112. In the summer of that year, the worst economic crisis since the end of World War II had befallen Japan because the Japanese yen had strengthened to less than a hundred to the dollar, the highest rate for the yen in decades. However, for an American like me, who was deep in debt and changing his money from yen into US dollars to send to the US and pay creditors there, a strong yen was good, because I could pay off debt more quickly.

But Japan's economic bubble had burst. As the yen had strengthened, real estate prices had fallen. Loans were tied into land values because land was held as collateral for loans. With the real estate market in a free fall, banks found themselves holding non-performing loans; their assets were drying up. As with any economic crisis (whether it be of the macro or microeconomic variety), there are all sorts of interesting and disturbing subplots to this story. And because they are disturbing (in that a lot of good people tend to lose their money and a lot of bad people don't), there is only so much one can learn.

In the film *All the President's Men,* the "Deep Throat" character [1] tells investigative journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, "Follow the money." Good advice, but easier said than done, given that nefarious characters find creative ways to hide the ill-gotten money they have acquired.

In any case, regardless of the reasons for the macroeconomic circumstances, here we were, people with little power in Japan – young foreigners on the other side of the world and young Japanese women – working for a company that wasn't paying us. Thus was born the epitome of an absolutely rotten microeconomic situation for the American Club's employees.

[1] Decades later (after the Watergate scandal), revealed to be Mark Felt of the FBI.

## 26. Not being paid? How about going to the press?

The American Club had monthly teachers' meetings and at a meeting a few months before we were paid late (shortly after Konno asked us to smuggle in porno), the teacher who chaired the meeting and seemed to be on very friendly terms with Konno said, "We all have to give 110 percent. We should all be thinking of extra things to do to help the American Club." (He didn't mention importing porno, as Konno had.)

Konno had previously said he wanted to start a company newspaper, and as part of my "110 percent," I volunteered to publish and edit one. I wrote articles, sought out teachers and students to write more articles, interviewed people, and noted future American Club events in the pages of the paper. I figured that was at least five percent of the ten percent above 100.

Later, at another meeting, someone asked for volunteers to work as bartenders in Utsunomiya at the Westside Bar that American Club owned. I figured this should take care of the other five percent of the 110, so I volunteered and worked there the summer of 1994. And that's when the pay problems began.

Shortly after beginning work part-time as a bartender, I got my black belt in *karate*. By that time, I was teaching full-time in Utsunomiya, and Konno wanted me to move there from Oyama, which I did, that September.

Our September pay was on time, the first it had been on time since May. I was beginning to think that perhaps I'd been paranoid about our pay. Except for a couple friends I'd borrowed money from, I hadn't told anyone about our pay being late. I looked forward to saving at least a couple of thousand more dollars (while continuing to pay off debt) and either look for another job in Japan or return to the US, which by that time had a booming economy. My visa was to end in March, so if I wanted to stay in Japan, I'd either have to stay at the American Club to get my visa renewed or find another employer to act as a visa sponsor.

But then came the dark days of October, beginning a descent into the netherworld of withheld wages. After we'd been waiting a few days for our late pay that month, I called up one organization, the Japanese Labor Standards Office. As the days of unpaid wages slipped by like

sands through an hourglass, I called another, the US Embassy . . . then another, the Japan Helpline, and others – Lawyers for Foreign Laborers' Rights, National Union of General Workers and more – in order to research our options and get help. I also began to look for another job.

I spent hours on the phone with the Japanese Labor Standards Office, speaking mostly with a young bureaucrat who kindly and patiently listened to my worries (in Japanese).

After I'd begun doing this, the advice from all the organizations I talked with could be summed up by what a woman in Tokyo told me after I'd called the number for Lawyers for Foreign Laborers' Rights: "Whatever you do, you have to act as a group to get your pay."

By that time, I'd already begun networking, talking with other employees on the phone for hours at a time at night. As soon as I would hang up the phone, finishing a discussion with one employee, the phone would ring, with another employee wanting to talk. In the morning (my workday in Utsunomiya began at 12:00 noon and ended at 10:00 PM), I'd be on the phone with the Labor Standards Office, labor unions, lawyers, and others, taking down notes as we talked. When not on the phone, I'd go to convenience stores and use their paid fax machines to fax employees the phone numbers of some of the organizations I'd been networking with, along with other information.

And, in the meantime, in November, I talked with Mr. Sugimoto and asked, "Who is my visa sponsor, you or Konno?"

"Umm, gee who is it? Konno, I think," he said.

Then, later that day, he came up to me as I was preparing lessons and said, "Don, about your question earlier today – Konno's not your visa sponsor. I am."

I thanked him, and soon after that, Konno called me into his office for a private meeting.

"I know you want to stay in Japan till your contract ends in March, and you're worried about your future," Konno said, as he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, wearing his usual business suit and tie. "You will now be on the IBL payroll, and your pay will be on time. Your teaching

duties won’t change . . . but like I said, your pay will be on time.” Then he took a deep sigh and looked me in the eye, which is rather rare for Japanese to do. “Please don’t tell anyone else about this,” he said.

“What about my month of late pay?” I asked, studying him, leaning back, with the ankle of my right leg crossed over my left knee.

He shrugged and gave me an “inscrutable” *tatemae* smile. The meeting was over.

But by that time, I had already passed the point of no return. I’d decided that I had to see this pay issue through to the end and had already met and had had long discussions with two officers of the National Union of General Workers branch in Utsunomiya.

I had every intention of making sure the teachers, staff, and students, as well as the landlords of the three branch schools’ spaces, got their money before the impending collapse. [There were four school locations at that time – the main school in Utsunomiya (where Sugimoto was the landlord) and three branches.] I figured it wouldn’t take more than two or three more months till this was resolved, most likely with the American Club’s inevitable bankruptcy.

I couldn’t have been more wrong.

*

In November, six of us out of a total of about 20 employees (many employees had quit since the beginning of the summer 1994, in the midst of not being paid; others were afraid to take action) had a meeting in Oyama with the two union representatives I’d talked to, along with a translator the union officers had retained.

The union representatives asked us to vote on officers. I was chosen (without campaigning) to lead as the head of our union.

We made the decision to request that the Labor Standards Office contact the company, have the Japan Helpline call the company, and have a retired judge that one of my fellow employees, Mr. Marine Reserve, knew (he taught English to a relative of the judge) call the company.

After the meeting was over, I went with Mr. Marine Reserve to the judge's house and we talked. Mr. Marine Reserve couldn't speak Japanese and the retired judge couldn't speak English, so I talked with the judge while his relative, Mr. Marine Reserve's student, listened and translated for Mr. Marine Reserve. I explained the situation to the judge while we all drank beer. He was in his 80s, so I wanted to make sure he understood. I asked him to confirm what we had just talked about after I'd outlined the situation, which he did. I gave him Sugimoto's phone number as well as my own. He gave me his business card.

Mr. Marine Reserve and I went to his apartment, and he gave me another beer. He began talking about some of the women at the American Club and asked me if I'd ever slept with any. I lied and said no. He had a girlfriend at that time that he'd met at the American Club. She was one of his students.

He told me there was another student he'd had sex with. To my surprise, it was Ms. Shinto. "Damn, she was good!" he exclaimed.

He told me he'd had sex with her after the going away party the previous year for the outgoing head instructor.

At that time, I had already broken up with her and was in the US on vacation (though she and I got back together later). That was after I'd told her earlier that she had to make a decision between her fiancé and me: either to marry him or stay with me. She'd chosen to marry him. I gave her my full support and told her she was free to do whatever she wanted with whoever she wanted. Apparently, she did – with Mr. Marine Reserve.

*

The retired judge, Mr. Nogami, called Sugimoto the next day. I sat by the phone, waiting for his scheduled call to me, in which he'd promised to relay to me the contents of his conversation with Sugimoto. The call came, and I let the phone ring two times, which is what I'd read is protocol for answering the phone in Japan. (Protocol was broken when phone calls came for the snack bar girls in Oyama.)

"*Moshi moshi*," I said, answering the phone.

“*Nogami desu*,” he said, stating his name. He quickly went from protocol to business. “Sugimoto said he’s the president of American Club, but that Konno’s running the company.” Mr. Nogami sounded much more animated than he had the night before, when we were talking the situation over as we sipped beer. “Konno will go to the bank and get the money and pay you all,” he continued.

I waited for more information, given that we’d already been told this numerous times by the American Club, but were still waiting for our pay.

“*Moshi moshi*,” Mr. Nogami said, awaiting my response.

“*Eeh*,” I told him, waiting for more information.

“Don’t worry,” he counseled. “Please listen! *Moshi moshi*.”

Umm,” I said, acknowledging I heard him, then, “Don’t worry about what?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. Konno will go to the bank to get the money,” he said.

I answered this with silence.

“Sugimoto told me something he said is extremely important!” Nogami said.

This got my attention.

“He said that there are some very bad things going on at American Club,” Nogami continued.

“*Sou desu ne*!” I said, agreeing with this assessment 110 percent. The “very bad things,” of course, were that none of the American Club’s employees had been paid in over a month.

“He said that some teachers – not all – are telling people like students, students’ parents, and others about the American Club not paying salaries. This has to stop. Don’t worry. Konno will get the money from

the bank to pay you. Teachers have to stop telling people about the situation. Do you understand?"

"OK," I said, "but what about the 'very bad things'?"

He repeated himself again about not talking to people about not getting paid. By that time in the conversation, it seemed he was more intent on having me and the others who weren't being paid keep quiet about it than on seeing that we got our pay.

"Anything else though?" I asked him. I was thinking of hearing some "very bad things" about *yakuza* or banks or real estate that the American Club had bought during the bubble economy. (Many American Club employees and other people in the Oyama and Utsunomiya community had suggested the American Club had *yakuza* connections. I really didn't care about this, as long as no one was getting hurt, I wasn't ordered to do anything illegal – like smuggle in porno – and I got paid for the work I did.)

But none of the scenarios I had in mind during the conversation were noted under the heading of "very bad things."

By the time the "*shitsurei shimasu*" part of Japanese phone protocol came, ending the conversation, I felt as if Nogami had forsaken his role as our conduit to Sugimoto and had taken on the role as Sugimoto's representative.

*

Later, two other employees and I went to the Labor Standards Office and told one of its representatives about what was going on. He promised to contact the company. Before we left, I sought out the guy who'd spent hours on the phone with me and thanked him profusely for his help.

We felt the American Club needed more outside pressure, so I had the Japan Helpline call the American Club. The person who called phoned me back and told me he'd talked with Konno. "Well, they have no intention of paying you. So you should take them to court," he said.

That day, I prepared a list of demands for the American Club and decided to confront Konno and Sugimoto with them. I walked to the IBL office with three witnesses, one of them a student, and read the demands out to Konno when I met him in the hallway. When I started reading them, he literally ran out the door into the parking lot. I wasn't going to run out to the parking lot after him, so I stood in the IBL doorway and yelled, so that he could hear me. The first and most important demand, of course, was to pay us our money.

After this was over, Konno asked me and the head teacher at the time (who believed the pay problems were just a temporary thing, despite the fact we hadn't been paid in weeks, and told me he was "110 percent sure Konno and Sugimoto will pay us everything they owe us") into his office. Konno was very upset that I had made the demands in front of other people.

"Why did you run away?" I asked. My question was ignored.

The head teacher asked me, "What good did that do – reading demands?"

"When are we going to get our money?" I asked Konno, ignoring the other teacher's question.

Konno ignored my question, as did the head teacher.

Several more minutes of ignoring each other ensued, followed by a minute or two of verbal sparring – jabs from them on how "very bad" I was to make demands of Konno in front of people, which were answered with forceful hooks and uppercuts by me, demanding an answer to the question, "When are we going to get our money?"

Konno finally threw in the towel when the round of sparring came to an end, and said, in exasperation, that we'd get paid on 20 December (which was by that time nearly a month away – plenty of time, I figured, for the American Club to declare bankruptcy, run away in the middle of the night, and leave us all high and dry).

The Labor Standards Office official we'd met with came to the American Club later and had Konno put his verbal promise to pay us by 20

December 1994 in writing. The official said Konno refused to agree to pay us before then.

A week or so later, we had our first meeting with two lawyers the union had found for us. We gave them a basic synopsis of what was taking place (or not taking place: we were not getting paid).

The lead lawyer, Masanori Kobayashi, looked at us pensively after making a few notes and said, “How about going to the press?”

I was all for it. By that time, I was certain that the more people who knew about us not being paid, the less chance there would be for Konno and Sugimoto to declare bankruptcy and run away. Also, I was sure that the more the public knew about this, the more I’d be protected, and I figured that since I was organizing employees, I’d need protection.

Kobayashi suggested that he call Konno for a meeting and – without informing Konno – call up several reporters he knew and invite them to that meeting. Then, when Konno showed up, he’d be met by both lawyers and reporters.

I told Kobayashi I thought it was a great idea. Keeping things hidden was the company’s only tool, while our best tool was to make the truth public. *And,* I thought, *the sooner, the better.*

Mr. Marine Reserve also thought it was a good idea. However, two teachers – a man and a woman – were opposed to it, the woman adamantly so. I’d learned by that time that this woman teacher was planning to teach full-time at a kindergarten she’d been teaching at part-time under her American Club contract. She’d been going to the kindergarten with one of the Japanese secretaries, who would translate for her. The kindergarten was going to sponsor her for visa renewal, which was coming up soon.

*

During the course of these events, I called up several of the Japanese employees to see what their thoughts were as to how to proceed in getting our money. Their response could be summed up by how the secretary who was working with the woman who was adamantly opposed to going to the press reacted after I’d called her.

“Maybe we’ll get paid and maybe we won’t,” the secretary said, talking in Japanese, as I looked out the window while the wind whipped rain against the windowpane. “But whatever you do,” she continued, “don’t fight this, because it will cause a lot of problems.”

*What should I do, if fighting for our pay is wrong?* I asked myself after the conversation ended, disillusioned with Japan, as I heated water for a cup of green tea.

Given that this was taking place in Japan, the Japanese employees had a support network of family and friends. However, as foreigners, we were vulnerable. The American Club was our visa sponsor (our visas were good for one year) and our contracts, which were necessary to receive visas, prohibited us from working at any other job in Japan. Therefore, our livelihood in Japan was dependent on the American Club.

*

Japan is said to have a “shame culture,” as opposed to a “guilt culture.” The scholar, Ruth Benedict, goes into this in her seminal book on Japanese culture, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. [1]

In Japan, being involved in any kind of dispute is considered in bad taste, and the Japanese will often refrain from taking action against powerful figures. Japanese women have told me that if they were being sexually harassed on a train, they would not do anything, because it would make them “lose face” and “shame” them in the eyes of society.

Apparently, if the press ran stories on the American Club not paying us, then the Japanese secretary would feel “shame” because of her association with the company. Apparently, the woman teacher would too. But I’m sure what motivated them both more than anything else was money – money they were going to get by working for the kindergarten after quitting the American Club.

I thought that no matter what Japanese society might think about being involved with the American Club while not being paid, people (Japanese and non-Japanese) would understand that a great wrong had been done to American Club employees and would be sympathetic to us. By that time, I had already spent countless hours in consultation with Japanese

people (not affiliated with the American Club) about our pay, and they had all sympathized and suggested we take legal action.

The male employee who was opposed to going to the press was worried about getting a job in Japan in the future. He later told me that a friend of his had said that Japan has a “blacklist” of foreigners who take action against their employers and as a result, the foreigners don’t get their visas renewed.

As for me, I felt that if Japanese society really didn’t want me to take action against my employer for not paying our wages, and if the Japanese government really didn’t want to renew my visa for asking for the wages due me, then Japan was indeed a scary place and I didn’t belong there. I was only seeking what was rightfully ours, and I figured I would take my chances. I thought it ridiculous to buckle under pressure from bullying employers.

However, I had been chosen as leader of the union, and without a consensus on going to the press as Kobayashi suggested, there was nothing I could do. I have often wondered what would have happened if we had gone along with Kobayashi’s suggestion. I feel that, in the long run, things would have gone much differently – and much better, especially for me.

This phenomenon of debating whether to make abuse public in order for those being abused to stop it, or hushing the abuse up (and thus allowing those doing the abusing to continue it) was to visit me again in Japan.

Evil maintains its power by staying out of the light. When exposed to the light, it loses its power and dies. The Japanese have a saying, “*Kusai mono ni ha, futa wo shiro*!” which translates as “If it stinks, put a lid on it!” And thus, evil maintains its power in Japan.

Despite what Konno had promised us, 20 December 1994 came and went without any American Club employees getting paid.

[1] Ruth Benedict was a professor of anthropology at Columbia University. She began doing research for *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* during World War II, commissioned by the US government, in

order to understand the Japanese mindset. The book has been both highly praised and highly criticized by Japanese and Western scholars.

Basically, a “shame culture” is one in which one’s behavior in the eyes of society is what is most important. A “guilt culture” is one in which the individual’s own conscience is most important. One can draw a correlation between the concepts of *giri* and *ninjo*. (See the glossary of Japanese words.)

## 27. Our day in court

I contacted all the employees and tried to organize them to seek our back wages as a group. There was a lot of resistance and fear on their part, but eventually a group of six employees, led by me, took the American Club to court.

The night before our court date, I went out for dinner and drinks with one of the IBL students and her husband. She said, without my prodding, that all the students loved my classes and were very proud of me for trying to get employees' pay.

I felt good and slept well that night.

*

Five of the six of us who took the American Club to court arrived in the Utsunomiya courthouse at 10:00 AM on 26 December 1994, as scheduled. (Mr. Marine Reserve was a litigant, but he'd gone on vacation, to China, a few days previously.)

Sugimoto wasn't there.

After fifteen minutes or so, he walked to the appointed room.

"You're late," I told him.

He ignored me and talked to Kobayashi and the three other lawyers in Kobayashi's law firm who had accompanied him to the courthouse for a few minutes in the hallway.

Kobayashi told us, "Konno couldn't get the money from the bank."

The other plaintiffs and I exchanged glances, as Kobayashi's assistant, another lawyer, said, "Sugimoto will come back at 3:00 this afternoon with the money – and he wants a meeting."

"We just want our money," I said. "We don't need a meeting."

Kobayashi and the other lawyers laughed. "Well, just come back at 3:00," Kobayashi said.

One of the other plaintiffs said, “We don’t have money for lunch. Tell Sugimoto we need to eat.”

One of the lawyers working for Kobayashi then went to Sugimoto and got a 10 thousand yen bill (the largest denomination in Japan, about $100 at the time) from him, holding it up and smiling when he brought it back. We accepted the bill and ate lunch.

When 3:00 came, we were there, as was Sugimoto, holding his briefcase filled with cash, with Konno at his side.

But Sugimoto wouldn’t give us the money.

At one end of the hallway, our lawyers talked with Sugimoto and Konno, while we waited.

When our lawyers came back to us, they said, “Sugimoto wants you to promise you won’t go to the press, talk to students or their parents about having to take him to court – umm – or talk about this with anyone else.”

We had already had our lawyers negotiate an agreement with Sugimoto’s lawyer to be paid at 10:00 AM, which Sugimoto had broken. It was a vast understatement to say we were getting tired of not being paid, and adding to the horror of having to wait for months, by that time on our day in court, we’d had to wait for over five hours after the time Sugimoto had promised to pay us in the courthouse. We just wanted our money – with no strings attached.

The agreement had a stipulation that Sugimoto, Konno, and the American Club wouldn’t hold our legal action against us – no harassing us during future visa processing, future job searches, etc. There was no stipulation about us not being allowed to tell people about our ordeal.

We refused Sugimoto’s request.

But soon after our refusal, Sugimoto’s request became a demand, and as time went on, this demand was coupled with other demands, one of them that I leave IBL, because, as Sugimoto claimed, “Students at IBL don’t like Don’s classes.”

This was a direct contradiction to what I'd been told by the IBL student I'd met the previous night, as well as what Konno had told me a few months earlier, before he and Sugimoto stopped paying us. Nevertheless, Sugimoto's demands multiplied and grew more forceful as time passed in the courthouse. At one point, I went to the bathroom and when I came out, I was told that Sugimoto had come to the group and told them that the demands about being quiet were "only for Don."

After an hour or so, two of the women employees were in tears, including the one who'd been so adamantly opposed to going to the press in our first meeting with the lawyers. "You guys, this is a lot of money for me," she managed to utter through her tears. "I just want to get it and get out of here," she said, wiping her cheeks, then wailing.

After a few minutes of witnessing this, I told Kobayashi that I was willing to forfeit my pay, but I wasn't going to promise to keep quiet. I then began to walk down the hallway, headed for the door out of the courthouse, with my mind set on packing my possessions, taking a train to Narita Airport, and leaving Japan for good.

But Kobayashi grabbed me and begged me to stay, telling me, "If you don't agree to this and leave, no one will get paid."

By this time, Sugimoto's lawyer, perhaps tired of his client's antics, excused himself and walked out the door.

Eventually, all the other plaintiffs, our lawyers, and the judge pleaded with me to settle the matter by agreeing to what Sugimoto was demanding.

After more "negotiations," Kobayashi and Sugimoto's lawyer visited the judge, who suggested we just agree to what had already been in our contracts, along with other items, including one that noted we'd get paid every month on the 25th. The item stated, "The employee will not take any action to damage the reputation of American Club."

We got paid.

The security guard had to unlock the door for us, because the courthouse had already closed; it was past 6:00.

And by the time I walked out the door, something had entered me which has not yet left – a connection to Japan that is as deep as any other connection I have to any person, experience, or place that has ever touched me in my life. Perhaps the seed that planted the connection had come when I'd passed level two of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, or when I got my black belt, or when I planted my seed in Ms. Shinto. But it had most likely sprouted the first time I glimpsed Japan from the flight deck of the *USS Coral Sea* as we had pulled into Sasebo 12 years previously.

Though the months-long ordeal was as distasteful as any I've been through, after my networking and negotiations with labor unions, lawyers, and government offices, I thought it would be a waste for me to go back to the States. I felt that what I had learned from the experience would help me get another job in Japan, and I'd met enough good people during the course of that experience that the prospect of staying in Japan seemed desirable. My experiences could only get better; they certainly couldn't have been worse.

Or so I thought.

## 28. Leaving the American Club

One bitterly cold night, about a month after we'd received our money in court, I came home from a class at a *juku* between Utsunomiya and Oyama and heated up my portable kerosene-fueled space heater, opening the window a crack before I did so. (I had to be careful I had good ventilation or turned off the heater before sleeping, or I might die of gas poisoning.) Then, as most Japanese do after lighting their kerosene heaters, I put a tea kettle filled with water on top of it. After a few minutes, steam began escaping from the tea kettle and thus, the kettle served as a humidifier. After twenty minutes or so, the phone rang while I was in the bathroom. I was expecting a call from a prospective employer, so I rushed out without flushing the toilet and ran toward the phone, but bumped into the stove on the way. The boiling water fell, drenching my foot. Burned badly and in excruciating pain, I limped as fast as I could to the shower, as if on automatic pilot. Reaching the shower, I ran cold water over the burned foot, and as I took off my sock, a layer of skin peeled away with it. I grabbed a towel and soaked it with cold water, then wrapped my foot in it. By that time, the phone had stopped ringing. I limped back to the bedroom and called "119," the number for fire or medical emergencies in Japan.

Speaking much better Japanese than when I'd called "119" from my Oyama apartment (about the snack bar girl getting beat up in my apartment building), I told the person who answered that I'd been burned badly, then gave my address. After turning off the kerosene heater, I opened a bottle of aspirin, popped three pills into my mouth, chewed them, and chased the by-then powdered aspirin with water. Then, I grabbed my health insurance card, coat, shoes, wallet, and keys and limped to the door. A minute or two later, I heard the ambulance siren and opened the door a crack so the paramedics could attend to me, but only a crack because I didn't want the bitter cold to overwhelm me.

When the paramedics came soon thereafter, they put me on a stretcher, carried me to the ambulance, and drove me to the nearest hospital. The siren wailed for the about-ten-minute ride.

The doctor treated my wound and wrapped up my foot. Before I left the hospital, he told me to keep my leg elevated as much as possible, which I did by putting my foot on top of a chair in the classroom when I

taught, and on the couch when in my apartment, while I lay on the floor and read novels like *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *Invisible* Man or listened to Bob Dylan songs on my CD player. I needed crutches to move around for the next few weeks, and it was difficult for me to cook my own food, so I took taxis to work and called a nearby pizzeria for pizzas to be delivered to my apartment.

I didn't miss any classes because of the injury, and in fact, though Sugimoto had said in the courthouse that he didn't want me in IBL, I continued to teach there. In fact, my class load actually increased. However, when my pay came after our court date, I found I was no longer on the IBL payroll; I was back on the American Club payroll. Not only that, but after going through months of negotiations over withheld wages that were supposed to have just been concluded, my pay was two days late.

*

In February 1995, I got an envelope with a certificate inside it, stating I passed Level two of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, which I'd taken in Tokyo a few weeks before our court date.

The next month, as my American Club contract was about to end, I found a job at a construction company called Kawamoto Kaisha, in Nagano Prefecture, a mountainous area northwest of Tokyo. I worked six or seven days a week, an average of 12 hours a day, but was never paid overtime. For the most part, I had to install insulation in houses. The insulation fibers got in my clothes, hair, eyes, and skin and gave me a hacking cough. Installing insulation was not what I had in mind when I'd been told in the interview that I'd be working as an interpreter and in sales.

I shared a small house with a group of carpenters from Canada and the US (who were hired from overseas but worked in Japan illegally on tourist visas, per the company's request). Not only was the apartment filthy, but after the carpenters left, I discovered some of my possessions were missing. I'd had enough of Kawamoto Kaisha, so as soon as I got my visa renewed, I gave the company notice. In early June 1995, I took the train to Tokyo, planning to try my luck there.

Back in Grand Rapids, when my father had gotten me a part-time job as a carpenter’s apprentice – which I had no enthusiasm for – I was still working at D’Amico’s, so I had something to fall back on when my time spent sleeping and smoking pot as a carpenter’s apprentice came to an end. This time, however, determined to leave this job working in carpentry in Japan which was little more than installing insulation, I didn’t have anything to fall back on.

## 29. Tokyo stories

I arrived at Ueno Station in Tokyo on a train from the Nagano countryside and put my bags in a coin locker. I then walked around in the hot sun and muggy heat, looking at the pretty legs of the OLs ("office ladies"), as they moved through the streets in their skirt and blouse uniforms. As the sun began to set, the muggy oppression began to wear off. I walked into a restaurant in Ueno station and had curry rice and a beer – a typical meal for a male commuter in Tokyo. *Well, I've got the rest of my life ahead of me,* I said to myself. *Where am I going to go?*

I went to Ueno Park, drank another beer that I bought from a vending machine, and looked at more pretty girls walking in front of the large pond in the park. Ms. Narita came to mind. *Where has she gone? What road has she taken in life?* I asked myself. One of the pretty girls looked at the *gaijin* forming words on his lips. I smiled at her. She smiled back and then hurried along with her two female companions, all of them dressed in their work uniforms. I realized that, on the last day I'd seen Ms. Narita, three and a half years previously, in January 1992, we'd sat on the same bench I was sitting on that day in June 1995.

I didn't have a job, though I'd saved a few hundred thousand yen (the equivalent of a few thousand dollars at the time). I could have rented a room, but chose instead to save the money I had for food. Thus began a period of homelessness for me. For the most part, I slept outside in parks, or sometimes, when it was raining, at a *sauna* or inside cheap all-night porno theaters. Other times, though, I'd sleep sitting up in a seat on the Yamanote train that runs in a big circle around central Tokyo. At least once every couple of days, I tried to bathe myself in a public restroom in a park by rubbing a washcloth over my face and torso. But this wasn't satisfactory. By chance, after I'd been sleeping outside for a few days, I found that one of the high-class department stores in Shinjuku had a sink inside one of the bathroom stalls. I'd lock the stall door, brush my teeth, shave, and then strip and bathe by running a wet washcloth with a little soap over my body, then wiping the soap film off. I did the whole operation thoroughly, but it never took me more than ten minutes. I made sure to leave the stall clean for the next person, by drying all the water that had collected around the sink and on the floor with paper towels before I left.

I lived outside for about a week and then got a cheap room in one of the houses that cater to foreigners in Japan – called a "*gaijin* house." This was in Sugamo, a neighborhood known for the large number of elderly people living there. Soon, I got a job at an English school in Kanda, one of the business districts in Tokyo, where I taught a heavy schedule of seven hours of classes a day, five days a week, while I continued to look for another job.

As I look back on this period from June to August 1995, it strikes me as special – a turning point in my life. Perhaps it's because I was between jobs, because I'd moved to Tokyo without a job lined up, or because of the area I lived in, with its narrow alleys and old buildings. Perhaps it was because I was alone, but never lonely. Or perhaps it was because I sensed I was about to get a job that actually seemed like it could be a career for me, instead of all the other jobs I'd had that had only seemed to be bridges to something else.

I also felt good about myself, because I had engineered a lawsuit against the American Club and had gotten what I and many others had asked for because of it. I was proud of myself for doing something I knew was good and just, but at the same time extremely difficult, given that I was fighting powerful people in Japan.

*

My job search led me to a trading company called USC Limited [1] in Fuchu, in western Tokyo. Fuchu is known for its large numbers of trees, the green of its parks, the Tokyo Horse Race Track, and one of the largest prisons in Japan. I was to work as a writer and translator for USC, which imported products, mainly from the US. In the interview, I met the company's president, Mr. Fujii, a man who spoke good English and said he'd lived in the US for a long time. He was an elderly man and seemed very pleasant. During the interview, he also mentioned he'd been placed in one of the infamous internment camps for Japanese Americans in the US during World War II. I liked him.

Mr. Fujii, Mr. Ueyama (one of the company's vice presidents), and John Rueth, an employee who worked in the company's Import Department, conducted the first part of the interview in Japanese, apparently to see how well I could speak it. After asking me about my experiences in Japan and my long-term plans, they gave me a test that consisted of

translating a business letter from Japanese into English and then writing a business letter on a computer. (At that time, in the summer of 1995, many people in Japan were not computer proficient.)

As for my experiences in Japan, I told them about the American Club, about not being paid and having to go to court. They were sympathetic. At one point, I said, “If I don’t get this job, I’m going to go to the Philippines or Mexico or someplace else cheap and I will write a book about what I’ve gone through in Japan.”

I really wanted the job, but I wasn’t sure if I’d get it. Nevertheless, I thought I had enough money saved to spend a month or two in a cheap country and then move back to the US. Or perhaps I would move back to Japan and teach English if I had to (preferably, of course, for a school that paid me).

One of them asked me, “What is the thing you dislike most about Japan?”

“Well, besides not being paid, I guess it is Japan’s attitude toward World War II. I also don’t like the word ‘*gaijin.*’ I don’t like being considered an outside person in Japan.” (As I wrote earlier, “*gaijin*” means “outside person.”)

I asked what benefits the company had. Ueyama told me I could expect a minimum ten percent raise after my first year, health insurance that would cover me not only in Japan but during vacations I might take overseas as well, and a good pension plan.

Ueyama called me about a week later and asked me to come for a second interview. When I came, they offered me the job at ¥300,000 a month.

I asked them if there was anything I should do to prepare myself for the job. They told me I should keep studying Japanese.

I also asked them if there were any books they thought I should read. I mentioned Karel van Wolferen’s *The Enigma of Japanese Power*. I was surprised they’d never heard of it, given that they were representing a trading company that imported products, mostly from the US, and van

Wolferen writes a lot about trade problems between Japan and foreign countries in the book.

[1] USC Limited is short for “United Specialties Company” – the “Limited” (or “Ltd.”) being the Japanese and European equivalent of “Company/Co.” or “Corporation/Corp.” in the US.

## 30. P.I. vacation

Before beginning work at USC, I took a ten-day vacation in the Philippines – my first trip there since 1982, when I'd been in the Navy. I spent most of my time in Manila, but also made a trip to Batangas, a town on the coast, south of Manila, to the island of Boracay, and to Olongapo, on Subic Bay, where my ship, the *USS Coral Sea* had moored. In Batangas, a man with a severe case of pox sat down next to me and ordered a whiskey while I drank a San Miguel beer at an outdoor food stand. In Boracay, I fell in love with a beautiful young Filipina named Rose, who sported long jet-black hair, and a red and blue tattoo of a tiger on her back, just below the right shoulder. On the way from Manila to Olongapo, on a rickety bus, I saw the destruction caused by the 1991 volcanic eruption of Mount Pinatubo. In one of the dust-covered villages, a hand-painted sign, planted in a mound of ash and filth, read "HELL," with an arrow pointing to where our bus was heading. Swarms of locusts or some kind of vermin flew about the wasteland as we made our way through it. Despite the desolation, communities of people still inhabited the wilderness, getting on with their lives as best they could, with children playing and men drinking San Miguel beer.

I had to bid goodbye to Rose and her tattoo, the Philippines, and the vermin of the wilderness to greet my new job in September 1995. On the way to the airport, the cab driver drove through Smokey Mountain – an enormous garbage dump where tens of thousands of people lived, so named because the waste it contained would sometimes decompose at such high temperatures that it would catch fire, occasionally causing deaths. Smokey Mountain’s inhabitants salvaged and sold the wares they found to passersby. The taxi driver slowed to avoid hitting them and the children that crossed the dirt road.

The memory of Rose, along with the images of the children playing barefoot in the garbage of Smokey Mountain and the wilderness, made my eyes cloud with tears as the plane took off for Narita Airport.

## 31. The American Club that refused to die

Not long after beginning work at USC, employees at the American Club began calling me and telling me that pay was late again.

On 9 January 1996, I had a message on my cell phone from the lawyer, Kobayashi, asking me to call him/ I did so that evening, after I'd finished work.

"*Konno san no yukuei ga wakarimasu ka*? (Do you know where Konno is?)" he asked. I told him I didn't. Kobayashi told me Konno had disappeared. By that time, the American Club's new employees' wages hadn't been paid in three months, just as ours hadn't. Also by that time, Sugimoto had signed off responsibility for the company, and the American Club had ceased holding classes. Thus began a second lawsuit against the American Club by its employees for three months' back wages.

I called a woman reporter at the *Asahi Shinbun* I'd talked with earlier and gave her the details about the American Club. I also put her in contact with Kobayashi. I had also been in contact with other newspapers in Utsunomiya, including one called *Networking* that published in English and catered to the foreign community in Tochigi Prefecture. I met, along with two other litigants in the lawsuits with the American Club, the editor of *Networking* and the *Asahi Shinbun* reporter. Later, when the lawsuit was filed, articles were run in both those newspapers and in the *Shimotsuke Shinbun*, another newspaper with a large circulation in the Utsunomiya area.

However, the company ignored a court summons and subsequent court order to pay. This fact, which I thought was the most newsworthy, was not mentioned by any of the Japanese newspapers. It was noted, though, by the English-language newspaper, *Networking*.

The fact that the company's directors were able to get away with this enraged me at the time. I was certain that if we hadn't agreed to Sugimoto's demand in the courthouse to keep quiet, the new employees wouldn't have suffered months of unpaid wages – as we had. It was obvious to me people would continue to be victimized in the future. Surely enough, and sadly so, I was right. I felt our lawyers and

the judge were complicit in this, because they had insisted that I agree to Sugimoto's demand.

But it wasn't only American Club employees who were victimized. The landlords of the branch schools and the apartments that the American Club teachers lived in had not been paid for as much as a year. The students, who often paid for classes months in advance, were also out their money.

Many people had thought that I had been too aggressive, telling too many people about the American Club not paying salaries. However, if I'd had to do it again, I would have been much more aggressive and would have told many more people, much earlier. The total amount of withheld wages in 1994-95 was the equivalent of $100,000, but I figure there was probably at least an equal amount due the landlords and students.

I called the editor of *Networking* after he ran the story, thanking him for doing so. However, he told me he wasn't going to run any more stories on the American Club. "This sounds like classic *yakuza*," he told me. "The reason I'm not going to run any more stories is because I have family and I want to stay in Japan a long time." As I looked out the seventh-floor window of my apartment at the traffic below on a windy March day, I recalled a few months previously, when he'd introduced me to his pregnant Japanese wife at a party.

Our phone conversation ended. I opened a beer and gazed at the crystal Lloyd had given me, wondering what he'd have to say about all this if he were still alive.

*

The school never went bankrupt, because, according to a letter Konno wrote to an American Club employee after he'd disappeared, Sugimoto had loans tied into the company (and if the company went bankrupt, it would spell Sugimoto's financial ruin).

During my time in Japan, I'd read newspaper stories of at least two cases of immigrants not being paid their wages in the New York City borough of Queens. However, outside of the three local newspapers printing stories about the fact we didn't receive wages, no one else

seemed to have any interest – not the newspapers in Japan or those in the US, including the newspapers that had covered the stories about the immigrants in Queens.

I contacted numerous news organizations, including the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan. I also contacted the US Embassy and US politicians, including Nancy Pelosi (who was my representative when I was living in San Francisco), but I got no replies. No one seemed to care. Once, after I sent a fax to the *New York Times* during the second lawsuit, I called the *Times* office in Tokyo and asked the woman who answered the phone if she'd received the fax.

She laughed at me. "Oh, you mean the one about an English school," she said.

I didn't understand why that was funny. In any case, apparently no one at the *Times* or any of the other US news organizations I contacted thought it was newsworthy. Nothing more was ever printed about the story. [1]

*

The ten employees who took the American Club to court won the lawsuit against the company in January 1996, but since those responsible for the company ignored the court summons, employees' prospects of getting their back wages seemed dim. However, after the court's ruling, the Labor Standards Office of Japan met with the employees, and in September 1996, nine months after the second lawsuit, they were finally paid 80 percent of their wages (with taxpayer money). The employees were satisfied with this situation, so I felt my efforts had paid off and my work was done.

I thought the end had come, but unbeknownst to me, a snake still lurked in the grass of Japan's corporate jungle. I thought all this was interesting, unique, and disturbing, so I began preparing notes to write a book, which I worked on for six months or so. After work, I'd go home to my apartment and write the notes out in longhand, in notebooks I'd bought at the convenience stores in my neighborhood, while sitting at the wooden table I'd bought across the street at a discount store called Don Quijote. Before work, I'd wake up early and go to the coffee shop, called Doutour, inside the train station close to my office building.

There, I’d sit down with an *espresso* to write at one of the small tables in the non-smoking section.

Since 1996, I had made several visits to the Utsunomiya Legal Records Office, where I obtained copies of the American Club business registration. This noted that the company was still a legally operating entity, with 30 million yen (equivalent to between 250 and 300 thousand US dollars in early 2017) in equity. The business registration also noted that the company was engaged in numerous activities not related to English instruction, such as bars and restaurants, hotels, video/software rental, and (ironically) employment services.

[1] Except for an essay, published in *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and a few letters to editors I wrote, which were published in the *Japan Times*, *Business Week* (International) and the *Mainichi Daily News*.

## Part IV: Trade problems, trade resolutions

### 32. A little about USC Limited

USC Limited was started in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo, in 1947, as Yayoi Oil and Fat Company by Mr. Masami (aka Henry M.) Fujii, who had worked as a salesman for Union Oil of California (Unocal) since the 1930s.

In 1947, Japan was impoverished and still suffering from the devastation of World War II. USC Limited developed its own distribution network throughout Japan, which allowed it to circumvent the complicated and costly distribution networks in the country between manufacturer and consumer. USC Limited thereby made a healthy profit on the goods it distributed from Japan's ports to its retail stores. In its first years, it imported and marketed oil and car care products, eventually branching out into industrial lubricants, tools, vitamins, popcorn, fish feed, PAM cooking spray, California wine, Scotch Whisky, and other products.

When I worked for the company from 1995 to 2001, some of its suppliers were Unocal, Con-Agra, and Prestone; some of its clients were Toyota, Nissan, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, and the Japanese government.

Mr. Fujii was a wealthy man. In the course of my work, I found he had a million dollars in one bank account. He also had a very large house, which must have been worth at least a million dollars, in Tokyo's exclusive Den-en Choufu District. In addition, he had a very large house in Kailua, on the windward side of Oahu – probably at least another million dollars there too. (In the course of my job duties, I was to make visits to both of these houses.) He had other numerous investments in the form of stocks, bonds, etc., and probably other investments I didn't know about.

Mr. Fujii had an American passport. The only other person, besides me, that I knew to have a foreign passport in the company was my supervisor, John Rueth, who was born and raised in Japan. His father was a German American from Wisconsin, who had first come to Japan during the Korean War. His mother was Japanese. His English was fluent, though he spoke better Japanese than English.

There was another employee who was born and raised in the US, but I’ll get to him later.

## 33. Writer and translator and . . .

My job at USC Limited was to handle all the company's correspondence. For outgoing correspondence, I'd receive a letter written in Japanese from one of the department heads and translate it into English. Then I'd show it to Rueth, who'd either approve it or give me comments on it and tell me to change something. (He almost always approved it.) Then I'd show the Japanese document and the English translation I'd written up to Fujii, who, depending on his mood, would either approve it by rubber-stamping it with his *hanko* (seal) or disapprove it, telling me to go to the department head who'd initiated it and tell the head why it was disapproved. For incoming correspondence, I'd bring all faxes to Fujii, who'd *hanko* them, whereupon I'd distribute them to the various department heads they were addressed to and verbally translate the contents into Japanese for them.

*

Mr. Ueyama, one of the department heads, was about five years younger than I was. He reminded me of Mondo at the Palladium, where I'd worked in San Francisco (except for the fact Mondo was taller than I was and Ueyama was shorter), because he always seemed to be impeccably dressed and greased back his black hair. I initially felt an affinity for Ueyama because, in addition to his native language of Japanese, he spoke Spanish as well – a language I also spoke. His English was also pretty good – better than nearly every other Japanese person I'd taught. Shortly after I began work at the company, he asked me if I wanted to go on a trip to the countryside with other younger employees. I had other plans for that weekend though, and declined his offer.

Later, he asked if I'd ever gone skydiving in the Navy.

"No," I said.

"It's one of the most exciting experiences you can imagine," he said. "I'll take you next month, if you want."

"OK," I answered.

But the next month came and went without any skydiving, and he never mentioned it again.

Shortly after I began work there, he gave me a test regarding what his department did – marketing agriculture and aquaculture products to various companies and government entities throughout Japan. He said if I got 90 percent or more of the answers correct, he'd treat me to dinner and I could have anything I wanted to eat and drink. He had one of his subordinates, named Hirano, [1] teach and drill me. I studied hard, and Hirano later gave me a test. I passed, getting only one answer wrong out of 40.

Hirano gave the results to Ueyama.

"When am I going to have the dinner?" I asked Ueyama the next day.

"Hirano said he'd take care of that," Ueyama told me.

But when I mentioned it to Hirano he told me Ueyama had never said anything to him about it. "But let's go have a beer," Hirano said, shaking his head and adjusting his glasses.

"OK," I answered, not one to refuse a friendly offer.

And we went to an *izakaya,* where Hirano complained about Ueyama even more than I did, and after three or four beers, we split the bill.

By that time, Hirano and I had become friends. Part of our affinity had to do with a mutual dislike for Ueyama and part had to do with a mutual liking for beer. In contrast to what Ueyama had said, Hirano never treated me to beer or anything else. Hirano was good at drinking beer, but not very good at buying it. He was quite big for a Japanese person, perhaps the same size as Mondo, and his big body probably helped him to put away the large quantities of beer we imbibed. He wore glasses that always seemed in need of wiping, and in contrast to Ueyama, he seemed to wear whatever clothes he could find on the floor of his apartment upon waking up.

One thing I didn't like about him was that he had a yen for snack bars and bargirls. He often invited me out on excursions, but I nearly as often declined because of the cost. The few times we did hit the snack

bars, I always paid my own share. Once, he invited me to the horse races, which took place at a walking distance from the neighborhood we lived in, about equidistant from the prison. The horse I bet on finished last, his horse came in fourth. Neither of us won, but we did enjoy the beer.

[1] “Hirano” is not his real name.

## 34. All in a day’s work

In the spring of 1998, shortly after I’d finished writing out a 50,000 word chronological history of my experiences in Japan and begun typing it up, planning to make a book, I was told by Ueyama to translate a document from Japanese to English. The document outlined the conditions the Japanese government required for fish feed, which our company imported and the Japanese government used in its fish breeding centers. There was a lot of technical language in the document, as there was in many of the documents I translated into English. However, I’d built up a basic technical vocabulary for the six departments in the company that corresponded with the suppliers the company imported from, and I did what I think was a pretty good job with this particular translation.

Later, Ueyama told me to send a fax to a company that supplied fish feed, stating the Japanese government was giving official approval to the company’s products. He also told me to state that once the Japanese government gives official approval to the product, it buys large quantities for a long period. He gave me a copy of the translation I’d done earlier, along with the Japanese original, and told me to send those documents along with the fax. Then he hurried out the door of the Import Department, where I worked, to a meeting.

Later, I showed Mr. Fujii the fax and the accompanying document, but he told me the seal on the Japanese document wasn’t the seal for USC Limited and told me to inform Ueyama. Later, Ueyama returned from his meeting, came to the Import Department on some other business, and I told him about what Fujii had said about the seal. Ueyama kicked my desk, snatched the document out of my hand, and stormed out of the room. A few minutes later, he called me on the phone from outside, as he was on his way to another meeting.

“The document was fake,” he said. “I didn’t want Mr. Fujii to see it.”

I was happy Ueyama hadn’t taken me parachuting.

Shortly after this incident, Rueth brought a document to me that stated USC Limited was the sole authorized supplier of a company’s fish feed in the Japanese market and told me to sign the name of “John Verstraeten” [1] to it.

“I think this is illegal,” I told him. “I don’t want to do it.”

He answered me with roaring silence.

I could have cut the tension in the air with a knife. I was afraid of losing my job if I didn’t do what my boss told me to. I finally broke the silence.

“I’ll only do it because you told me I have to,” I said.

After my pen left the paper, he snatched the document from my desk and I immediately regretted following his order. But I didn’t know what alternative there was. Disobeying orders in a Japanese company is unheard of, and I was worried my hesitation in complying with his order might hurt me. Among other things, the company was my visa sponsor, and to put myself in conflict with my visa sponsor was to put my livelihood in Japan in jeopardy.

At lunch that day, I called the American Embassy and asked for advice, whereupon they sent me a list of lawyers. I also called the Labor Standards Office, which I’d called when we weren’t getting paid at the American Club. They told me I could come in for a consultation.

The next day, I went to Ueyama’s department, took the document from his desk (while he was on a business trip), and crossed out the name I’d signed. Later, I called Ueyama and told him what I’d done.

“Just forget about this!” he barked and hung up the phone.

Later, Ueyama told me to write another cover letter for the official Japanese government document I’d translated, to send to the company. When I showed the document to Fujii, he was drinking tea and stroking his moustache.

“You better hurry up and send it,” Fujii said, as he *hanko*’d it. “They’re waiting for that!” he told me anxiously.

Then, I gave the document to Ueyama, who immediately sent it, with the translation, to the company in the US by fax.

“I’ll send it by registered mail,” I said, thinking that if it was forged, Ueyama would take the document and hide it, though it was company protocol to put all documents containing correspondence with overseas suppliers in the Import Department files. Obviously, he had no compunction breaking protocol, not to speak of breaking the law. (There had been at least one other forged document I had seen that Ueyama’s department possessed and was not put in the files. It, like the document I’d been ordered to forge a signature for, had stated falsely that USC Limited was the sole distributor for a company’s products in the Japanese market. Hirano had showed me the document and had asked me to write a fax, per Ueyama’s orders, to the company and request that the company give USC Limited sole distributorship in the Japanese market. The company refused, but the document was signed anyway – by someone at USC who’d forged a signature.)

I took the document from Ueyama, quickly making a copy before going to the post office. I wasn’t sure if the document was forged or not, but I figured that since Ueyama had already made up a fake document and both he and Rueth had ordered me to participate in fraud, it wouldn’t hurt to make a copy.

[1] “John Verstraeten” is not his real name.

## 35. Born in the USA(?)

I wasn't sure what to do. I knew that going to Fujii about the document I'd been ordered to forge by Rueth would have been a waste of time because – besides the fact he'd try to protect his company at all costs – like Ueyama, he'd lied in writing as well. One instance of this was when he told me to send out a document he'd signed stating he was retired, so he could get retirement discounts on membership fees for various organizations. But I was told about something else too.

His nephew, who was working for the company, told me Fujii hadn't been born in California, as he stated he had been in numerous documents and as was noted on his passport. His nephew told me in a conversation, which began during a train ride from Fujii's neighborhood in Den-en Choufu and continued over a beer, that Fujii was born in Okayama Prefecture, Japan. Thus, if what his nephew said was correct, Fujii was not a *Nissei* (second generation Japanese American) as he claimed, but an *Issei* (first generation Japanese American). Given the racial climate at the time Fujii was born (1914), in the midst of the "Yellow Peril," [1] he (or his parents) probably had a lot to gain by claiming to be born in the US. If what his nephew said was true, then his passport and the copy of his birth certificate that was kept in a file in my office were fraudulent.

*

Fujii liked to tell stories about his long life, and I liked to listen to them. Once, at a dinner with one of our American suppliers at the Imperial Hotel, [2] he said that, in the early 1940s in Southern California, he'd been approached by a Japanese Admiral, [3] who'd asked him to sign a document requesting the sale of five tankers of aircraft fuel from an American oil company, to be shipped to Japan. Fujii said the Admiral told him he needed an American citizen to request the sale in writing because the American government had cut off sales of fuel to the Japanese. [4] Fujii agreed, the sale was made, and the ships arrived in Japan. A few months later, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, with aircraft launched from aircraft carriers.

*

I didn’t trust Fujii. In my interview, he, Ueyama, and Rueth had promised me pay and benefits that I wasn’t receiving, and I was often blamed for things by Fujii that weren’t my fault. As I noted, I was tasked with bringing correspondence to him I’d written at the direction of the heads of the different sales departments. When Fujii didn’t like something these department heads wanted, he’d blame me – the messenger – instead of confronting the person responsible, which is a Japanese phenomenon. (Sometimes, I would make three or four trips between Fujii and the department heads before an issue was resolved, because neither of them wanted to confront each other directly.)

[1] The “Yellow Peril” phobia from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries was racist fear mongering among Western countries (mostly the US) over Chinese and Japanese immigrants’ influence in their societies. This resulted in, among other things, anti-Asian immigration laws.

[2] One of the most exclusive hotels in Tokyo.

[3] Fujii paused to ask me in Japanese what the word for “*taishou*” for an officer in the Navy was. (It means “Admiral” in the Navy and “General” in the Army.)

[4] After the Japanese slaughter of civilians in China and the Japanese occupation of Indochina.

## 36. My friend, the Japanese Imperial Army veteran – from California

Before making friends with Hirano, I made friends with a co-worker, who worked in the Import Department. I'll call him George. [1] A few weeks into my job, George invited me to have a cup of coffee. Thus began a daily ritual. George was 79 years old when I first met him, ten years older than my father was at the time. He'd tell me about growing up in Northern California, which at that time was where I considered home and where he said his family had owned the largest lettuce farm in the Sacramento Valley. He'd played in a baseball league for Japanese Americans in California when he was a teenager, attended an American high school, and moved to Japan before the outbreak of war with the US. When war did come, he was drafted by the Japanese government and served in China, where he lost most of the hearing in his left ear, from a combination of being too close to artillery and being slapped on the side of the head over and over again by officers for not understanding the Japanese that was spoken to him. So, in order to hear what I was saying, he'd always move to my left side when we were walking to the cafe.

George had spent the last year of the Second World War as a POW in China.

"Did you ever see the Great Wall?" I asked one day, after he'd paid for our coffee and we sat down.

"Yeah, I saw it," he said, stirring his coffee. "I even pissed on it."

On another coffee outing with him, he talked about when he was in China and his platoon would execute suspected Chinese spies.

"Did you ever have to execute any of them?" I asked.

"No, but I had to watch," he said. "The spies would kneel and somebody would behead them with a *katana* (a *samurai* sword)," he told me, between sips of coffee. "They were brave, I'll give them that. They never flinched."

One day, he told me about seeing a young conscientious objector summarily executed by the *Kempeitai* [2] as the man's parents were

forced to look on, after the man had refused to serve in the Army. Later, George was drafted into the Army. He didn’t resist induction.

He also told me stories about the Occupation of Japan (from 1945-1952), how he’d make money selling goods on the thriving black market, and about all the sex taking place between members of the Occupation forces and Japanese. Because George could speak both English and Japanese, he was in a good position to benefit from the trade in goods and the vices that took place.

If I had been Chinese, I would have had a difficult time sympathizing with him and his experiences during the Second World War, but because I was American, and he’d grown up in America too, he became my best friend at the company. He was Fujii’s half-brother.

[1] “George” is not his real name.

[2] Japan’s military police, which operated both in Japan and overseas. One of its functions was to enforce conscription.

## 37. Tokyo Labor Union

Ms. Asakura was on the phone when she opened the door to the cluttered union office that had been fashioned from an apartment. I was five minutes early for the appointment we'd made a week earlier. She was a short, attractive woman, dressed in slacks with what I noticed, as she turned around, was a nice big ass inside them, somewhere near the border that separated sexy from fat (I'm not sure which side of the border). She had dark black hair, with at least one strand of gray, surrounding a round, attractive face.

I showed her copies of the forged documents and told her about the promises my company had given me in my job interview regarding pay and benefits.

"*Dantai koushou no moushiireshou wo teishutsu dekimasu*," she said. (She spoke no English.)

I'd studied Japanese very hard my first years in the country and had consulted over and over in Japanese with countless labor union officers, lawyers, and bureaucrats, and I had been working at USC Limited for two and a half years by that time (where about half of my conversations at work were in Japanese). Nevertheless, many times I still couldn't understand the Japanese that was spoken to me. This was one of those times.

I knew that "*teishutsu*" meant "present/give," and "*dekimasu*" meant "able to do/make something possible," but I wasn't sure about the rest.

"*Sumimasen, chotto wakaranai desu kedomo, kaisha ni chokusetsu renraku suru wake desu ka*?" I said, asking her if she was offering to contact the company directly.

She showed me an example of a "*moushiiresho*" and from the Chinese *kanji* characters, I could glean she was telling me the union could contact the company and request a meeting. I was correct; she had offered to contact the company directly. She then showed me a list of the union's rules, one of which was that a union member would give 20 percent of any money that might be awarded during union negotiations to the union. She also gave me a pamphlet on the benefits of belonging to a union.

“Won’t the company just fire me if I confront them on this?” I asked.

“The company can’t fire you. If they try, then the union will take action against the company – and the company will be so embarrassed that they’ll regret trying to fire you. With this kind of serious fraud, the company won’t want to take that chance,” she said, as she typed hurriedly on her desktop computer.

“*Eigo de kaitearu shorui ga arimasu ka*?” I said, asking her if she had anything in English. She fumbled around through some drawers for a while but didn’t find anything.

I told her about my experiences at the American Club. “I really don’t want to go through that again,” I told her (in Japanese). “I feel like in Japan when there is a *gaijin* in any negotiation between two parties, the *gaijin* is used by both parties and the two Japanese organizations come to an understanding with each other, and the *gaijin* is hung out to dry in the end.”

“*Chigaimasu yo*!” she countered, telling me that wasn’t so.

I sucked in air, like Japanese do when they consider something they aren’t sure how to respond to. “*Ja, kentou shimasu*,” I said, as I exhaled the air I’d sucked in, telling her I’d think about the union negotiating for me.

“*Hai, kentou shite kudasai*,” she answered, almost distractedly, as she sat back down at her computer, encouraging me to consider her offer to negotiate with the company.

## 38. Vietnam

One day, I went to the Nakano district in Tokyo and walked around one of the Tokyo neighborhoods that hadn't yet been paved out of existence, and still maintained a pre-World War II flavor in its small collection of tiny restaurants and bars. Earlier, at Kinokuniya bookstore, I'd bought – for a second reading – the book *Vietnam: A History*, written by Stanley Karnow, a former reporter for *Time* magazine and Pulitzer Prize winner (for his book *In our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*).

I recalled in Mr. Hammond's class at El Centro College, when he had told us that during the Vietnam War he used to have his students research Ho Chi Minh. Ho's life was filled with travel, imprisonment, harassment, scholarly pursuits, studying and mastering foreign languages, and above all pursuing independence for his country – first from the French, later from the Japanese (when he worked with the American government, during World War II), later against the French again. Finally, he fought against the Americans.

As I walked down the street after a haircut, with a small carafe of hot *nihonshu* in me, cradling *Vietnam: A History*, I saw a Vietnamese restaurant. I walked inside and ordered dinner.

"*Kare shiteimasu ka*?" (Do you know who he is?) a woman who appeared a little older than me asked, as I was looking at a picture of Ho Chi Minh in the book, a Southeast Asian accent coming from her sensual but slightly stiff lips.

"*Kare ni tsuite benkyou shiteiru*," (I'm studying about him) I told her, as I sat down, after placing the book on the table. "*Betonamu ni ikitai desu*," (I want to go to Vietnam) I said.

In contrast to many East Asians I'd met in Japan – Japanese and non-Japanese – this woman began a conversation with me in Japanese. (Most people would start conversations in English.) She introduced herself to me as Lanh, from Ho Chi Minh City. "*Watashi ha nanmin desu*," (I'm a refugee) she told me later, as I looked up at her and asked her what she thought of America. Perhaps she was one of the refugees that had been spotted and saved by my Navy ship, I thought. "*America ga suki desu*.

*America ha tadashii desu*," (I like America. America is good and just.) she told me.

The dinner was good, I thought, as I sipped BBB beer. Lanh gave me her business card, as Asakura had done at the labor union office earlier. Just as she'd told me she liked America and said America was good, I felt the same about her and Vietnam.

"If you ever go to Vietnam, you can stay at my house," she told me in Japanese, shortly before I left.

As a matter of fact, I'd wanted to go to Vietnam for some time. I'd actually made a plane reservation to go shortly after I'd left the American Club, but because I couldn't process the visa fast enough, I abandoned the idea.

I made another reservation to go to Vietnam and requested a week off work. Though I didn't have a lot of savings, I had enough to make the trip and concluded that if I didn't make it when I had the chance, I might never make it at all.

After I'd bought the ticket, I went to Lanh's restaurant and told her about my plans. She gave me her phone number and offered to have her son drive me to the airport in Tokyo. I accepted the offer to stay at her house in Ho Chi Minh City. Coincidentally, she'd planned a trip to Vietnam as well for the same time as I had.

*

"*O genki desu ka*?" she said, asking me how I was as she picked me up in a car at Tan Son Nhat airport in Ho Chi Minh City to drive me to her house.

"*Hai. Okagesama de*," I answered, telling her I was fine. People in the vicinity looked at us with wary smiles as we spoke a language none of them knew. She spoke no English and I no Vietnamese, so naturally we communicated in Japanese.

She then introduced the driver of the car to me. "*Watashi no danna-san desu*," she said, informing me the driver was her husband.

Though Lanh had a husband, I still enjoyed my time in the country. To paraphrase my nine days in Vietnam, it is a beautiful country. But like any other East Asian country I've been to, the people gave me mixed feelings, which I most likely reciprocated. But I liked it more than I disliked it. I felt comfortable as we moved down the Mekong River in a boat, where the scenery was lush, the girls pretty, and the BBB beer plentiful as I rode to Vung Tau, south of Ho Chi Minh City.

One day, I went on a trip to Cu Chi, outside Ho Chi Minh, where a collection of tunnels that were used extensively during the war by the Vietcong is located. On the return trip to Ho Chi Minh City, riding on the back of a motorcycle driven by a skinny, pimply-faced nineteen-year-old who spoke about ten words of English (more than the three or four words of Vietnamese I'd dutifully memorized and can't recall at this writing), I saw a woman in a conical hat walking along the road and leading a flock of ducks. I took a picture of her, aiming my camera behind me in a desperate attempt to capture what I thought was a bucolic scene, but when I got the photo developed, all it showed was a white and green blur.

Lanh and her husband treated me well. As we drank sweet Vietnamese coffee one day, talk turned to the Vietnam War (known as the "American War" in Vietnam) and they told me her former husband had been killed in 1975, while working as a paratrooper, shortly before Saigon (later called Ho Chi Minh City) was overrun by the NVA. [1]

Meanwhile, I was considering what to do with the rest of my life. Should I leave Japan? Should I try to simply change jobs and stay in Japan? Should I confront my company over its fraud and broken promises? After I told Lanh of my predicament, she offered me lodging in Vietnam for a year if I wanted it and assured me I could find English students among her friends, some of whom joined us on her veranda and introduced me to cobra wine – a strong alcohol with a complete cobra snake tucked inside.

"No worry, it dead," the old woman I'd purchased it from earlier in the day said. Perhaps, I thought, it had expired from excessive alcohol consumption in its place of permanent rest. "Wine" is a misnomer, as it is closer in alcohol content to whiskey.

A few days later, I went to the Ho Chi Minh museum, where a Vietnam veteran from Brooklyn introduced himself to me and asked if I knew of any books on Ho Chi Minh. I told him about Karnow's book, pulling it out of my bag to show him. As I did, the cobra wine I'd purchased nearly fell to the floor as well. A young, slender woman with long black hair, wearing an *ao dai*, [2] and who I thought looked similar to Ms. Narita, smiled and said, "Velly strong."

"Which one of us?" the Marine who'd fought in Hue said.

"No you. Snake," she said.

Later, I made a trip to the War Crimes Museum, which depicts much of the American War from the communist viewpoint. One thing that struck me was that although the museum displayed photos and articles of demonstrations against the war in Europe, no mention was made of opposition to the war in the US.

After perusing its contents, I walked out of the museum to a UH-1 (Huey) helicopter in the front yard of the museum. From there, it was on to the center of the city, where I ate a good lunch as a large rat scurried about the floor. And a few days later, I was back in Japan.

[1] North Vietnamese Army.

[2] An *ao dai* is a traditional Vietnamese dress.

## 39. Fraud, negotiations, and flower viewing

After having thought long and hard for almost a year about negotiating with USC Limited (and having submitted my documents to Immigration to renew my visa), I went to Asakura's office in March 1999 to tell her I'd made the decision to go ahead and confront the company over the forged documents. It was the third time I'd visited her, and the first time I'd seen her smile.

"But I care more about USC Ltd. apologizing to me and the companies it defrauded than about the money it promised me," I told Asakura, pausing for a couple seconds, looking at her till I saw by her facial expression that she acknowledged me, then continuing. "I'm negotiating for an apology."

"Also," I said, as she lit a cigarette, "I won't agree to keep any of this quiet, like I had to do during the first American Club lawsuit . . . and I want to go to the press at some point with this story."

"*Wakarimashita . . . Mondai nai*," she said, telling me she understood and it would be no problem to comply with my wishes. She put her cigarette in the ashtray on the table between us and reached for her cell phone. Then she turned her gaze away from me, quickly punched numbers on the keypad and brought the phone to her ear. I looked at my watch: 7:30. Our meeting was over. She had another appointment.

Later, in a fax, I told her the same thing I'd told her in person – in big, bold underlined letters: *□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□*(An apology is more important to me than money!).

*

I psyched myself up for negotiations, going over scenarios in my mind over what might occur and practicing negotiation techniques over and over in Japanese in front of a mirror in my apartment, just like I used to do when preparing to recite poetry in San Francisco.

But before negotiations began, it was time for *hanami*. The word *hanami* in Japanese literally means "flower viewing." *Hanami,* in practice, is a Japanese tradition in which people gather in parks in spring, usually between late March and mid-April, depending on the

location in Japan. While the cherry blossoms fall, people drink alcohol and sing *karaoke*, using microphones attached to portable speakers that they set up on a tarpaulin, on the grass in a park.

And just before the first negotiation session, the union had a *hanami* party. We sat in a circle, and – as is usual for Japanese get-togethers of this kind – introduced ourselves one by one, giving a short speech about our experiences in the union and in negotiations with our companies. There was one woman who kept looking at me, a smile on her face each time she did so. Once, when I looked back, I realized it was my turn to speak. I told people about the fraud in my company and the promises my company had made and broken about pay and benefits.

After numerous beers and cups of *nihonshu*, cherry blossom petals falling in our cups as we talked, we became progressively more animated. Dusk began to fall upon us, along with the cherry blossom petals, and someone said something about going to a bar. I fell behind the crowd, as did the woman who'd been looking at me. I'll call her Ms. Hanami. She asked me if I could teach her English. I gave her a noncommittal "unnh" and looked into her eyes. They were brown, warm, and inviting. A gentle breeze blew cherry blossom petals into her dark-brown hair and I reached for one. She was about my age (39 at the time), or perhaps a year or two older. She smiled and we kissed, then kissed some more. We walked arm in arm, making out till we reached the edge of the park, then caught up with the group, went to the bar, drank and sang *karaoke*. I went home with a good buzz and her phone number.

Shortly after that, I received my new visa, good until 16 March 2000. When I asked Asakura how long it would take to reach a resolution I'd be happy with in the negotiations, she said two or three months. So with my visa good for another year, I figured that gave me plenty of time.

When the union makes initial contact with a company it wants to negotiate with, it does so unannounced. When the scheduled day for Asakura to come to USC Limited arrived, I tried without much success to hide the sweat escaping my pores and the trembling inside me with a good *tatemae* front, as I sat at the computer in the Import Department, translating an order for motor oil and transmission fluid from 76 Lubricants Company into English. Asakura had said she'd come about 9:30 AM, but 9:30, 9:45, and then 10:00 came and went, without any

trace of her. Finally, shortly before lunch, she arrived. When she called me at my desk, I answered the phone and went to the reception area, where she waited with another union member accompanying her.

Fujii was gone, so she called Ueyama and told him she was “with the National Union of General Workers, representing Don MacLaren. Could you give us a couple of minutes to discuss his work conditions?”

Ueyama responded in the affirmative and I saw him put on one of his Mondo-style jackets that perfectly matched his well-pressed slacks. We went to a conference room, where a week before a group of male employees had indulged in the cinematic delights of Ai Iijima, [1] a former pornographic star turned TV celebrity, engaging in uncensored oral sex, moving on to vaginal sex, and culminating in anal sex. The video was one of the imports highly prized in Japan, because unlike Japanese porno, American pornography clearly shows genitalia. However, it was not something USC Limited imported and marketed. (I was wondering if Konno had convinced someone at the American Club to import it.)

Ueyama took the *moushiiresho* from Asakura and quickly read through it. The short meeting ended with a “*wakarimashita*” from Ueyama (indicating he “understood”) and a *tatemae* promise to resolve all the “misunderstandings” expeditiously. “I’ll give this to Mr. Fujii when he comes back from Hawaii,” he said.

About a week later, Ueyama came to me in the Import Department just after my working day had ended, clutching the *moushiiresho,* which stated ‘contact the union in order to meet for a negotiation session to be held within ten days.’

“I called this number twice and sent two faxes and I haven’t gotten an answer,” Ueyama told me. I told him I’d talk with Asakura.

When I called Asakura later, she was busy and couldn’t take the call. When I finally did get through to her a couple of days after that, she told me she’d call him the next day.

*

There are times in life when an iconic image appears out of nowhere and strikes a person. One of the iconic images that struck me was in a documentary on the Battle of Okinawa I saw on TV while sitting *seiza* (from a kneeling position, folding one's legs – thighs resting on calves, buttocks on heels) on the *tatami* in my Oyama apartment. I saw a man who looked about 83 years old walking to the camera; he was dressed in rags, with a *tatemae* smile on his face. He began to hold up one of his hands as if ready to surrender. Or maybe  he was readying a hand grenade with his other hand to blow himself up, along with an American or two, to take with him to Emperor Hirohito's Promised Land. The man was probably much younger than 83, but after going through the Battle of Okinawa just about anyone would look that old.

Fujii was 83 years old when I saw him walk toward me in the hallway at work one day. I had to get his *hanko* for a fax I was about to send out, but he raised his hand as if about to slap me on the side of the head or toss a hand grenade my way and told me in a voice I can best describe as a clear, coherent mumble, in English, "No. Go to hell with that." Then he left the office, surrounded by three of the company's directors.

Later, from a hospital bed, he answered the union's allegations, denying each one of them, including the fact the company was ordering me to participate in fraud. Someone from the company faxed his reply to the union's office after Fujii had stamped it with his *hanko*, giving his approval. The document was the last Fujii set his *hanko* to and his last act as president of the company. He died later that night. I often wonder if things would have turned out differently if he had not died then, but perhaps six months or so later.

Ueyama called Asakura to arrange a negotiation session, to take place in late spring 1999. In the session, he, like Fujii, denied everything, as he sat in his neatly pressed blue suit, with two directors flanking him.

The second negotiation session took place on 14 July 1999. Once again, Ueyama denied any wrongdoing. He proceeded to lie again and again, almost until the end of the session, when I asked John Rueth for the second time in as many negotiation sessions, "Did the company forge any documents?"

"We already said no!" Ueyama whined, exasperated, answering for Rueth, who exuded a rotten smell from his body and breath, though he

was several feet from Asakura, another young male union officer, and me.

"You're lying," I told them.

The space between Ueyama’s nose and upper lip began to build up with sweat, as he opened his mouth to speak again. But before he could, I took out a copy of one of the forged documents and slammed it on the table in front of him. He flinched, as if I were raising a *katana* in the air and was about to behead him (which, I must admit, I actually did fantasize doing).

After a lengthy, roaring silence, he opened his mouth. "Don doesn't have any responsibility for this whatsoever," he finally muttered. He was barely audible, but loud and clear enough to be recorded on the cassette tape recorder I’d put in the inside pocket of my suit coat.

Ueyama’s appearance seemed to have changed within a few seconds to something Hirano would have created if he were a fashion designer and stylist.

“So the company needs to apologize to Don. And not just verbally, right?” Asakura said. It was more a statement than a question.

“*Sou desu*,” (Yes, that’s correct) Ueyama muttered, like a lion that had been attacked by his brethren after being caught fornicating with his boss’s favorite lioness.

When we were confident he was sincere in promising us a written apology, I said, “Well, I guess the meeting’s over. I think it’s time for lunch.”

I walked outside to a gray, humid day, with dark clouds and a lot of positive ions in the sky. I hadn't slept at all the night before, and I felt relieved when I sat down at a table in a restaurant and drank a cold orange juice. As I picked it up, I noticed my hands were shaking.

*

Despite my success, I questioned my own decisions and considered where my life was leading, as I wrote in my diary.

Diary entry, 12 May 1999

Have I achieved “success?” Or have I done what most do – either settle for second best or fail miserably? I haven’t followed the traditional road to what society regards as success. I haven’t gone to law school or medical school. I don't have an MBA. Besides the fact that I can type, the only concrete thing I can show as an employable skill is my Japanese ability, and though my Japanese ability is all right – for a *gaijin* – does it really mean anything at all?

Negotiations proceeded into the summer of 1999 and took place on what always seemed to be excruciatingly hot, humid days. In one of the early negotiation sessions, the company, through Mr. Arai, one of the company’s vice-presidents, stated that Ueyama had been forced to step down from the company’s board of directors because of the fraud he’d perpetrated. He also made a proposal to “pay ¥100,000 (a little over $800 at the time) in compensation for overtime Don is owed and making Don participate in fraud against his will.”

“What about a written apology, like you promised?” I asked.

Arai looked at Ueyama and Rueth, puzzled. They returned sheepish looks. “*Eeh*,” Arai said, which can mean anything in Japanese from “yes” to “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, and I don’t give a damn.” It seemed closer to the latter interpretation.

Asakura called for a break, whereupon she, two other union officers, and I went to a restaurant on the first floor of the building in which the negotiation was being held, to talk while we drank coffee.

Asakura punched buttons on her calculator, her hair falling in her face as she did so. I noticed she had a few more strands of gray hair than when I’d first met her, but they were still vastly outnumbered by the black strands. I felt a combination of desire for her and frustration because of her. (Negotiations were taking much longer than she’d indicated they would.) She suggested we ask for 2.5 million yen (a little over $20,000).

“What about the apology?” I asked her.

“Getting the apology is no problem,” she told me. “It’s the money that shows they’re sorry. If they just tell you they’re sorry, it doesn’t mean anything.”

I had to concede she had a point, but I was getting impatient. I wanted to get the documents to the defrauded parties; besides which, I was wound up with tension after months of negotiating with the company, and my health was beginning to suffer from all the sleepless nights I’d been through.

We ended the break, returned to the room we’d been negotiating in, and Asakura made a monetary proposal to the company of 2.5 million yen to settle.

[1] Ai Iijima was one of the best-known TV personalities in Japan. After a difficult childhood, she drifted into the porno industry, then into TV. She died alone in her Tokyo apartment in 2008, of pneumonia, at 36 years old.

## 40. Beer negotiations

“*Moshi moshi*,” I said, answering the phone in my 7th floor apartment one night as the *bousozoku* motorcycle gangs rode past my window, roaring their engines as loudly as they could. It was Mr. Yamaguchi, a friend of mine who worked at the company and who – in contrast to Hirano – had invited me to *sunakku* and paid the bill. Yamaguchi said he and Mr. Mori, the company's accountant, wanted to meet with me. “Did you know we formed a union and we’ve been negotiating with the company?” he asked.

I met them in Shinjuku Station a few days later, where we talked business and drank beer in one of the station’s numerous restaurants.

“We want Ueyama out of the company,” Mori said, his moustache having turned white from the suds in his mug of Asahi draft beer.

“Sounds good to me,” I told him.

Yamaguchi suggested I ask for at least one million yen (a little over $8,000 at the time) in reparations “because the company is forcing you to do something criminal,” he said, as the waiter brought us a second round of beers.

“In America, you could ask for a million dollars,” Mori said, pulling a PEACE cigarette from his pack. “Why don't you go ahead and do that, just for the hell of it?" he told me, laughing.

When they pledged me their support, they asked if they could have copies of the forged documents and the union demands. I said I’d think about it.

The conversation turned to the subject of Fujii. “I really liked him at first,” I said. “You’ve got to admit, he must have worked hard to get his money.” (Fujii was a multimillionaire when he died.)

Yamaguchi agreed. “I think being an American who could speak Japanese during the Occupation helped him,” he said, setting down his beer and taking out a Mild Seven cigarette from a pack he opened.

Then, as Yamaguchi lit the Mild Seven, Mori told us what Fujii’s nephew had told me earlier. “He wasn’t really American. He was born in Japan. He lied about being born in America.”

## 41. The company wants to settle

As I stated, after I'd made the decision to go through with negotiations, I talked with Asakura and made clear to her I wouldn't let the company do what the American Club had done in court: make us promise to keep what they did to us a secret. She answered me with a definitive "*Wakarimashita*," telling me she understood and would follow my desires in negotiations.

*

"*Wakarimashita*," Asakura said to Ueyama in the next negotiation session, after he said the company wanted to keep the negotiations secret. The company also said they wanted to give me ¥350,000 (a little under $3,000) in compensation, instead of the ¥100,000 it had offered earlier. Ueyama also gave Asakura the document Fujii had written and *hanko*'d, in which he denied any wrongdoing. We took a break and looked it over, though by this time the company had admitted most of what it had denied when Fujii wrote the document.

"This is ridiculous," I told her, referring to the company's request to keep negotiations private. "I feel like leaving on the next flight out of Japan, going to Vietnam or the Philippines, and writing about all this."

She looked at me like a puppy in need of attention, and I turned my gaze out the window at the branches of the trees swaying gently in the sultry breeze, as I took a deep breath. I recalled the times I'd looked out the window in Catholic Central in Grand Rapids, searching for another world, as I saw the winos across Division Avenue passing around a bottle. I was looking for another world again. Only this time, I was on the other side of the world.

"*Mou sukoshi gaman suru, ne*. *Kaisha ha sugu kyoutei suru to omoimasu yo*." She asked me to hold on just a little while longer, because the company would soon surely concede and try to come to an agreement amenable to me.

After the break, when we said we weren't willing to settle under the conditions the company outlined, Arai requested the union provide in writing a list of all monies it believed the company owed me. Upon receiving it, he said, the company would consider the requested

monetary proposal and pay me what it could in order to reach a settlement.

For the most part, I felt it would have been silly to forego coming to an agreement with the company, when I was obviously the winner in the negotiations. But there were also many times I thought it would be best for me to just end negotiations and go by myself to the Japanese Ministry of Forestry and Fisheries and the companies USC Limited had defrauded.

I lay down the night after the negotiation session, exhausted after having written Asakura a long fax in Japanese about all this. Exhausted though I was, however, I couldn’t sleep. I recalled what Asakura had written me earlier in response to my suggestion that we go to the defrauded parties ourselves, as well as call up newspapers to see about having them publish a story about all this.

“The job of the union is to try to ensure a good working environment at the company that employs the union member, not to cause confusion in the company,” she’d said. So, after reading her response, I wrote down what it was I wanted the company to do in order to make it a good place to work. The first thing I thought of was racial discrimination – though it wasn’t so much just the company I worked for. It was Japan in general that I thought of when composing a fax on that topic.

## 42. Fasts, calls, and threats

Since the time I was 18, I would put myself through short periods of fasting (24–48 hours at a time) and long periods of renouncing tobacco and alcohol while studying. [1] I had also been exercising regularly since I'd begun meditation – calisthenics, jogging, and swimming. I had done calisthenics and jumped rope when I could when I was in the Navy, out at sea. In port in Alameda, I'd jog a half hour or so, then swim laps in the Olympic size pool on base. After I got out of the Navy, I jogged regularly around the streets of Dallas, Oakland, and San Francisco. In my last residence in Oakland, near the MacArthur BART Station, I'd jog nearly every day from my apartment down to Lake Merritt in downtown Oakland and back – a round trip distance of about seven or eight miles. When I'd worked at the American Club, I'd done karate three or four times a week.

In Tokyo, I jogged around a Mori Park, near my apartment. The park was the equivalent size of about two city blocks.

I also began to swim at the pool on the other side of Mori Park. For a year or two, I swam nearly every day. However, with the negotiations taking place, I hadn't been able to take time to exercise. My time was taken up with reading union literature in Japanese, writing faxes to Yamaguchi, and organizing materials for the negotiation sessions. Nevertheless, I knew that this would all take a lot of work, and I had made the decision to go through with it to the end. At this point in the negotiations, I thought the end was in sight.

But it was only the beginning.

*

Mr. Yamaguchi called me up at night, a few hours after a negotiation session. "How much did the company offer you?" he asked.

"*San juu go man en*," I said, letting him know about the company's most recent monetary proposal.

"That isn't enough," he said.

“*Kumiai ha ni hyaku go juu man en wo teishutsu shita*,” I answered. I made it clear the union didn’t feel it was enough either, and told him what the union’s most recent counterproposal was (2.5 million yen) before the conversation ended.

After I hung up the phone, I opened my diary, reading through it for a couple minutes, noticing that whereas before in the entries I’d made in Japan I’d noted references to mostly women or my former problems with debt, I was now writing down almost exclusively what transpired in negotiations with ABC Limited. I made another notation in the diary: “Yamaguchi called and said he thought—” Before I finished my sentence though, the phone rang again.

“You have to think about other people in the company, Don!” It was Mori on the other end. “People like me have been working for this company for 30 years. We have families!" he yelled, angrily.

“Talk to the union then,” I said.

It was as if he didn’t hear me. “You have to stop asking for so much money! 500 thousand yen is sufficient compensation."

This, of course, was more than the company had offered, but much less than the union, Yamaguchi, and Mori, himself, had suggested I ask for earlier. Anyway, I had already made it clear to Asakura and the union that I valued an apology more than the money.

"What do you want?" he asked me.

I didn’t see any other recourse than to express loyalty to the union, so I told him, “I want everything the union is demanding.”

He said that getting the apology on the terms I wanted was all right, but that it would be impossible for me to get the money the union wanted.

"You should talk to the union about that," I told him again.

Japanese have a limited vocabulary of swear words. Much of their anger is expressed in their tone of voice, in which of the many words in the Japanese language they choose to address someone as “you” or in the way they conjugate the verbs in their speech. There are polite, familiar,

and vulgar ways of talking. If I had to translate what Mori was saying to me, it would be something like, “Don’t fuck with me, Don. I’m a big man!”

Indeed, Mori was a big man, but his power wasn’t so much physical as psychological. Not only had he worked at the company for 30 years, but the union he belonged to was known as the “*yakuza* union,” because it intimidated and provoked and extorted money from companies similar to the way organized criminals do. One common way to do this is to dig up embarrassing information on a company and threaten to make it public if the company doesn’t pay up what the gangsters demand.

*

Ever since I’d begun the ordeal of taking the American Club to task for not paying us, people had told me to be careful. In whispered voices, they’d say, “He’s (referring to Sugimoto) *yakuza*. He’s scary. Stop it, you’ll get hurt, or someone else will get hurt.” But those voices could just as easily have been referring to Mori. “*Kusai mono ni ha futa o shiro*!” (“If it stinks, put a lid on it.”) But the only way I could find justice was to take the lid off and air out the stink, exposing the vermin that thrive in darkness to sunlight.

Shortly after Konno fled, he sent a letter to one of the Japanese secretaries working at the school. “I talked to Sugimoto once on the phone and he told me he would send right wing sound trucks and yakuza and the communist party in front of my wife’s business every day and chase me all over Japan if I tried to file for bankruptcy,” he wrote.

Everyone was supposed to be afraid of Sugimoto because he was a bully.

As it turned out, Mori, a person who had earlier professed friendship and support for me, was a bully too.

I considered immediately packing my bags and going back to the US. When morning came, though, I sat down and wrote Mori a letter in Japanese, telling him not to talk with me any more about the union and the negotiation sessions, and telling him that if he brought up the union during working hours that I would leave work and go home for the day.

I then took a shower, got dressed, went into work, and gave him the letter.

[1] I quit smoking on New Year’s Day, 1993.

## 43. Union news

One of the things we were supposed to do as union members was distribute “Union News” to employees in the company. After a fitful night of sleep, I got up early one morning and revised the Union News I’d been working on, adding an article about racial discrimination. I also stated that if anyone in the company wanted help, they should contact the union, as one of the other things we were supposed to do as union members was to try to recruit other employees at our companies into the union.

That night, I brought the document to Asakura, in her office. She gave it a cursory glance, as she did with all the documents I gave her.

“Can I go ahead and give it to employees?” I asked.

“Unnh,” she said, by that time having sat down with a calculator to figure out how much money she was supposed to receive from another company that had just agreed to settle another grievance with another union member.

I made copies of the Union News at a Lawson convenience store, and during the lunch break the next day, I passed copies around at work. Then I went to my desk and ate the lunch I’d prepared for myself – rice with stir-fried vegetables and canned tuna.

As I chewed the last piece of food and set my chopsticks down in the rectangular plastic lunchbox I brought to work, Mr. Kurihara, a short man built like a fireplug and head of the advertising department, came in.

“What the hell is this crap?” he said, waving the Union News in front of my face. “This is a workplace. You can’t hand this out here,” he told me in Japanese – the only language he knew.

I took a sip of cold green tea before I told him, “Yes, I can. If you have questions, call the union. The phone number’s on the bottom of the last page.”

“You’re causing trouble here . . .”

“I didn’t cause any trouble,” I said, cutting him off. “The people who caused trouble are Ueyama, Rueth, and Fujii. Talk to them or to Mr. Takahashi (the new president of the company and one of Fujii’s nephews). He’s responsible for the company. That’s all I can say. I’m not going to talk about this anymore. Excuse me. I have to go to the bathroom.”

A few minutes later, as I pushed the flush lever of the toilet with my foot, I considered what Fujii would indeed say if Kurihara talked with him. *Fujii is probably in the same place everything I just flushed down the toilet is headed, with a tatemae smile on his face, at the mouth of Shit River,* I thought.

Before I joined the union, I’d told Asakura I was worried about being harassed by people at work for union activity that Asakura said I was obligated to perform as a member of the union. “They can’t harass you. It’s illegal. If they try to harass you, then tell the union right away,” she’d said.

My lunch break was going to end in five minutes, and in order to make a phone call in private, I had to take the elevator from the 12th floor to the first floor of the building, where a payphone was located. I didn’t have time to make a call to the union, but it was at the top of my mental list of things to do after work.

The day progressed routinely. I translated several documents from Japanese to English and sent out faxes for three orders. One went to 76 Lubricants Company, one to one of the biggest tool companies in Europe and one to the supplier of fish feed whose president’s name Ueyama and Rueth had told me I had to sign. I also brought several faxes in English from various USC Limited suppliers to Takahashi, verbally translated them for him into Japanese, and waited for him to *hanko* them. I then made copies and gave them to the respective departments the faxes concerned.

About 5:30, a half hour before I was to get off work, Mori came up to me while I was at the copy machine and showed me the Union News.

“Don, you made a mistake with Ueyama’s name,” he told me, while giving me his version of a *tatemae* smile. “One of the Chinese

characters is wrong." Then, he yelled, "*Machigatta bunsho ikan*!" (Go to hell with this shit you're handing out to employees.)

Faces in the vicinity turned toward me. One of them, a big fat one that belonged to Kurihara, the head of the advertising department, laughed. I felt like kicking the copy machine, as Ueyama had kicked my desk when I told him the forged document he'd given me to translate had the wrong seal on it. I also felt like kicking Mori in the face. But instead, I just finished making copies, tried to still the demon inside me that was on the verge of exploding, did my time until 6:00, and punched out on the time clock.

Not only had I told Mori I didn't want to talk with him about the union, but I'd told him that if he brought up anything to do with the union at work I'd go home early. I called Asakura after I arrived at my apartment, but her line was busy, which was the case about half the time I called her. I sat down and wrote her a fax, telling her what had happened at work that day, and sent it to her.

Then I wrote another Union newsletter, outlining in Japanese why it was I'd joined the union, why I was negotiating with the company, and the confrontation with Mori earlier in the day.

I faxed the Union newsletter to Asakura, then walked outside to Mori Park, which consisted of a fountain in its center with a small hill nearby, a walkway that ran around the circumference of the park, and another walkway that passed through its middle – punctuated with cherry trees on either side. A baseball field and a nearby soccer field were in one corner of the park and a small wading pool was on the other end.

I entered a small grove next to a small pond, where I could see people much more easily than they could see me, and I sat down. This place was a refuge in the big city and seemed a conduit to another realm of existence, something beyond what I knew, just as the secret stairway had been in childhood. I wrestled with the thoughts in my head that had sprouted from the events of the day, as I leaned against a tree whose branches swayed in the breeze.

A year or so earlier, half a block from my apartment, I'd found an abandoned plant across the street from my apartment, next to a large garbage container that crows and stray cats were picking through as

the sun rose to begin a hot summer day. I walked past it that day on the way to a vending machine down the street to buy a cup of hot black coffee. (I always drink coffee hot, no matter how hot the weather.) On my way back home, I stopped at the plant and decided to adopt it. I picked it up, put it in my apartment, and watered it diligently. It grew accordingly. In six months, I had to change the pot it lived in twice. By the time I began negotiating with the company, it had outgrown another pot, and I decided it needed a new home. So, in the dead of the night, I went to the grove in the park and dug a hole for it there. It was doing fine that day.

When I came home, I called up Asakura again and asked her if she'd seen the fax I'd sent her.

"Yes. It looks fine," she said. "Go ahead and give it to the employees before work or during lunch time."

"Can you call the company and tell them to stop harassing me?" I asked.

"We'll tell them at the next negotiation session," she promised.

## 44. The dead man, the deformed man and the *gaijin*

I woke up the next morning at 5:00 and couldn't get back to sleep. I showered, dressed, and decided to go for a walk in Mori Park, after buying a can of hot black coffee from the nearby vending machine. I paid a visit to my plant, sat down on a rock nearby, and drank my coffee as birds chirped in the trees above and carp swam in circles in the pond. Then I set out for Lawson convenience store. On the way there, I saw a man lying in the middle of the street, under a pedestrian bridge. A police car arrived, and a cop got out of the car and began directing traffic so it wouldn't hit the man. Another cop ran to the man to see if he was all right. Yet another cop came to the sidewalk and asked if anyone had seen what happened. As far as I could tell, the man was dead, probably from jumping in front of a car from the pedestrian bridge. I continued on my way to Lawson, looking down at the ground as I contemplated the body of the man I'd just seen and the incident with Mori the day before.

"Aggh," someone uttered in shock and fear. As I turned my head up, I heard the same person say, "*Gaijin*!" I was as shocked as he was. The man was grossly deformed, with a huge reddish welt on the left side of his face that was much too large to have been the result of injury. His deformity must have been with him since birth, just as my deformity, being a *gaijin*, was from birth. But he seemed more shocked to see me than I him.

At Lawson, I made copies of the Union News. After finishing, I arrived at work at 8:56 to punch in on the time clock, which didn't leave me enough time to distribute copies of the union literature. So I did it at lunch. When I saw Mori later in the day, his face was a beet red, but not from embarrassment; I saw from his eyes that it was from anger. People at work that day didn't talk to me any more than they had to, except for Hirano, who suggested we go to lunch together, which we did.

Hirano was the only friend I had left in the office. Before negotiations with the company began, George had transferred to the company's Osaka office to be closer to his wife's family. The next day, I called George at lunch, told him about the negotiations and what the company did, and asked him what he thought. He said he would talk to some of the company's directors and get back to me.

In the meantime, per the company’s request, the union submitted a monetary proposal in writing to settle all claims: 5 million yen (about $40,000 at the time).

## 45. Old friend, new enemy

The next week brought the next negotiation session. Like the shock when I'd seen the grossly deformed man, I was shocked to find Mori was now a director of the company. He sat next to Ueyama. I peeked inside the room. There was no sign of Asakura. As usual, she was late, and I waited in the hall for her to arrive.

When she finally came and negotiations began, Mori immediately took charge.

"Don sent the fraudulent document without the company's permission," he insisted, shortly after Asakura sat down. And for an hour and a half, until we stood up to leave, he continued to attack me relentlessly. It seemed the only way I could win the argument was to yell louder than he did, which I tried to do, but he was a big man and his vocal chords were better developed.

"You didn't tell Fujii about this," he said.

"Yes, I did," I said, standing up, outraged.

"C'mere," Mori demanded, pointing with his finger at the space in front of his desk, provoking me and challenging me to a fight.

I told Asakura I needed to take a break. I had to muster all the psychological energy I had to restrain myself from jumping on Mori and strangling him and all he represented to death.

## 46. Transcribing broken promises

I met with Asakura later and she told me she wanted to take the company to the Labor Relations Board because they'd gone back on their promises. But, she said, in order to do so, I had to first transcribe the complete contents of the last two negotiation sessions from the tape recordings I'd made.

I spent weeks at this extremely meticulous task, staying up into the wee hours of the morning and devoting my weekends to it. I had to listen, over and over, to conversations before I typed out the dialogue, because it was sometimes very difficult to understand what a person was saying, with all the background noise in the recordings. Also, it was often difficult to understand the Japanese that was spoken. I asked Asakura for help, but as usual, she was busy. By the time I was finally done, I had over 150 typewritten pages of dialogue (over 75 pages for each 90-minute negotiation session).

*

In addition to the problems with the limited consultation time, I sometimes felt uncomfortable negotiating in Japanese, though naturally all the negotiations took place in the language. Although I can speak it, I'm not a native speaker. So it was easy for the company to manipulate me during negotiations, which of course they tried to do. Therefore, I asked the union to look for an interpreter. Asakura always assured me with a "*wakarimashita*" every time I asked her, that she was looking for one, but an interpreter never came.

*

Asakura and the union contacted the company numerous times to tell them to come to another negotiation session, but the company ignored us (in violation of labor law). Asakura had given me a two to three month estimate for a successful conclusion to negotiations, but nine months after negotiations had begun, there was still no end in sight.

## 47. Ms. Shinjuku, *tatemae*, *honne*, *giri,* and *ninjo*

On New Year's Day 2000, I dug under a pile of advertisements for porno and prostitution services in my mailbox, looking to see if I had anything besides that and junk mail in it. I was pleasantly surprised to find a New Year's card from a woman I knew. I'll call her Ms. Shinjuku.

*

Shortly after taking the level three Japanese Language Proficiency Test in December 1991, I began studying for the level two test. In order to help me prepare for it, I took Japanese lessons over the phone for a while with a woman from Tokyo. Then, after I took the level two test, in December 1992 at a college in Shinjuku, not far from her home, she and I met.

I thought her attractive and intelligent. She'd studied Chinese in Taiwan for a year and spoke English as well as Chinese (in addition to her native Japanese). I asked her out again and a couple weeks after we met in Tokyo we went to Disneyland together.

She told me later that she was going back to Taiwan to study Chinese, and a couple months after that, I went to Shinjuku Station to see her before she left. We went to a Chinese restaurant. She knew the people working there and spoke with them in Chinese. One of the waitresses told her maybe she'd get married if she went to Taiwan. Ms. Shinjuku laughed and translated it for me into Japanese. I told her a lot of people said the same thing to me before I came to Japan.

She gave me an indifferent, mumbled "unnh" and an insolent wave of her hand, as if she were slapping me in the face. A few minutes later found us in front of the ticket gate in Shinjuku station, saying "goodbye." She told me she'd write, but I took the train back home to Oyama never expecting to hear from her again.

*

However, she had popped back into my life after a hiatus of several years. On the New Year's 2000 card, she wrote, "Call me!" I did, telling her in Japanese about all I was going through in the negotiations with the company, how much I hated the whole thing, and how it was

draining my life. She listened sympathetically. Later, we met and had lunch. I was glad that at last I'd found a Japanese friend who really seemed to care about me.

A week later, I went on an overnight trip with my union to Saitama Prefecture, adjacent to Tokyo. During the trip, we had several meetings, but I felt left out. I was the only foreigner there, and Asakura ignored me as she drove me and two other male union members on the hour-and-a-half trip there and back. I'd told her, again and again, the time I spent consulting with her wasn't enough. If she cared, she would have used the time we had in the car to talk with me. Instead, she chose to flirt with the other two male passengers. They talked about things like massage parlors and high school girls wearing school uniforms without panties.

The depression was beginning to overwhelm me by the time I got out of the car at the union office, after the trip. However, when I arrived at my apartment, I found a letter from Ms. Shinjuku, who told me she was sorry for all I was going through, said she supported me, and prayed it would all be over soon (she was one of the perhaps one percent of the Japanese population that was Christian). She also told me she looked forward to seeing me again. Her letter cheered me up. After months of stress, the lack of resolution had begun to produce thoughts of suicide as a possible answer my present quandary.

I called Ms. Shinjuku again. She listened patiently to my problems and tried to soothe me. She said she looked forward to spending more time with me and was hoping I could spend a lot of time with her family. I felt warmth like I hadn't felt since Ms. Shinto. But like the warmth from Ms. Shinto, the warmth from Ms. Shinjuku was deceiving.

*

Japan has many layers of reality. There's the *tatemae* surface reality and there's the polar opposite, the *honne*, but there are several layers in between, as well. There are also several aspects of one's will between *giri* and *ninjo*. Some compare Japan to an onion – the more you peel it, the more layers you find – but Japan is also like a woman in a *kimono*. There is not only the aesthetic surface layer of the kimono the outside world sees, but there are also several layers between that surface layer and the skin. *Kimono* dressing is an art and craft, like calligraphy or

*ikebana* (flower arranging), and many Japanese women spend years perfecting the craft of dressing themselves and others in all the layers of kimono. The name for the craft is *kitsuke*, and Ms. Shinto was one of its practitioners.

It’s easy for us mortals to get lost, deceived, and mistaken. Sometimes gods come in disguises and sometimes spirits change tone, color, temperature, and their outlook on us humans, swimming around like fish in a fishbowl. One can often think one is taking a certain path in life, while unwittingly being led to a completely different path, entranced by and lost inside the layers of a woman's *kimono*.

The previous time Ms. Shinjuku and I had met, I’d told her my mother was coming to Japan to visit, and before I even finished my sentence, she said she wanted to meet my mother, even though I hadn’t asked her to. The reason I had brought the subject up was I wanted to tell Ms. Shinjuku I really didn't want my mother to come to Japan, because of all the problems I was having with the union and company.

I met Ms. Shinjuku again on Saturday, 5 February 2000. We talked for a few hours in a restaurant, and on the way back to the train station, I put my arm around her. She reciprocated. We kissed and parted. With the kiss, I felt I’d transcended with her. We’d taken a trip together to pay our respects at the shrine of the warm gods and goddesses. And I was sure it was the first of several visits to come that we’d make together. But, unbeknownst to me, I’d gotten lost in the layers, trapped inside the onion. Was it *giri* or was it *ninjo*? Was it *tatemae* or was it *honne*?

Whatever it was, I was mistaken.

I wrote her a letter in Japanese a couple of days later, but got no response. I tried calling her several times after that. No answer. Valentine's Day came and went, without a letter from her. I then wrote her more letters in Japanese. I was thinking that, perhaps because of my limited ability in expressing myself in Japanese, I’d made some mistake and given her the wrong signal by accident, but I was also sure that if she really cared about me, she’d contact me.

After several attempts at making contact, I finally got through to her answering machine when I tried to call her. I told her answering machine I was in love with her, and paused, trying to think of something

else to say. Concluding there wasn’t anything else, I hung up the phone and waited for a response. Over a week went by and I couldn't stand the waiting. I then sent her another letter, telling her everything I could think of. I also included an English translation, just in case I hadn’t been able to express myself sufficiently in Japanese. (She could read English.) I felt as if every cell in my body was breaking up and the core of my being was falling apart. I was going crazy, lost inside the layers of the *kimono* of the goddess who’d put a curse on me. In another letter, I finally told her that if she wanted to see me again to write back by the time the *sakura* (cherry blossoms) had stopped falling. It was late February at that time, and the *sakura* had not yet even begun to bloom, so that gave her at least a month.

The day after I’d sent her that most recent letter was the first day of the year that truly felt like spring, and I could smell the fecundity of nature all around, as I spent the night walking through Mori Park, exploring every corner of it. I cried as I thought of her, and I continued to cry for weeks, sometimes having to hide my face at work as the tears began to flow. I forgot about the hell of the negotiations, but I hadn’t escaped hell. I’d only entered another realm of it.

When we met in January, she’d told me that she’d "died" in the hospital about six months earlier, having an out of body experience but coming back to life. From my perspective, she’d died again, but this time failed to come back to my life.

For some reason, fate had brought Ms. Shinjuku and me together to share the knowledge of that experience, but in the end, fate was cruel. I was destined to travel the rest of my time on earth without seeing her again, with no explanation from her as to why she’d chosen to abandon me. It's funny that times like that, when I felt closest to death, were the times that the tears and the pain in my heart made me feel most alive as well. I concluded that I wouldn’t be able to go through such an experience again and continue to live.

The *sakura* were in full bloom and their petals fell on me as I walked through the park. The sky was clear, and Ms. Shinjuku might as well have been some misty fantasy, for she was gone with the falling of the *sakura*, never to return.

## 48. My company is suing me?

Reality transformed like a chameleon. Its various incarnations appeared, disappeared, and reappeared. The cherry blossoms bloomed and the petals fell, and before you knew it, the rain had washed away all the beauty. Beauty then hibernated, or it turned cold, or hid itself in a layer of a woman's kimono, or in a ghost . . . and when it was ready it would return. Or would it?

*

I scoured the *Japan Times'* help wanted ads for jobs and applied for several. I also wrote and sent out about a hundred resumes, along with cover letters and writing samples of articles, essays, and letters to editors I'd published (in journals such as the *Japan Times* and *Business Week*). I sent them to various companies and organizations, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, General Motors, Ford, Chrysler, Toyota, Nissan, Nabisco, Beatrice Foods, Lehman Brothers, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Chase-Manhattan, Citibank, Random House, Alfred A. Knopf, Simon & Schuster, Penguin Books, City Lights Publishers, New Directions Publishers, the California Department of Education, the New York State Department of Education, the U.S. State Department, the United Nations, and just about everybody else I could think of.

*

Shortly after my mother had come to visit me for two weeks (though I wasn't able to spend much time with her, because when not at work, I was caught up in the labor negotiations), I made a trip to New York City. It was May 2000 and I had an interview with the New York City Board of Education about a job in the Teaching Fellows' program. In the program, the city subsidizes a Master's degree in education and those accepted into the program teach at a low-performing school as part of their requirements to obtain the degree. Returning from the trip, I opened my mailbox, and under the usual pile of advertisements for porno and prostitution services, I found a letter from the Hachioji, Tokyo courthouse. USC Limited was taking me to court and suing me for proposing more than the ¥350,000 it had initially suggested to settle claims.

*But the company requested the union make this monetary proposal! And the union made the proposal, not me,* I said to myself. Flabbergasted, I read the letter again, just to make sure I hadn't made a mistake with the Chinese *kanji* characters.

“I don’t care about the money!” I yelled out loud. I’d told Asakura, again and again, that an apology, not money, was my priority. The company wouldn’t have bothered suing me if it hadn’t been for the money the union was asking for.

With the letter was a copy of the documents the company had submitted to the court. I couldn’t have cared less about any of them, aside from the one in which the company falsely stated I’d sent out a forged document without the company’s permission to one of USC Limited's suppliers.

I picked up the one chair I had in my apartment and beat it as hard as I could against the wall, again and again and again, trying to still the demon that had taken residence inside me and was eating me up. I broke the chair into pieces and put several holes in my wall. The demon inside me, however, was undaunted and remained unmoved. I dropped the pieces to the floor, looked out my seventh-floor window onto one of the busiest streets in Tokyo, and thought of how easy it would be to jump out the window and fall to my death to end the frustration I was living. But I thought better of it and sat down.

Then I began to weep.

That night, I went for a walk in Mori Park, to pay a visit to the plant I’d placed there. It had been a week or so since I’d seen it last, surviving a cold winter, its leaves dying, but coming back to life in the spring. The last time I’d seen the plant, it had looked robust and happy, but when I walked into the woods to find some comfort in its presence, after learning my company was suing me, it was gone.

## 49. The law school of hard knocks

Later, in a meeting with Asakura, I asked her how much a lawyer would cost me.

“About ¥300,000 (about $2,500 at the time)” she said, as we sat in her cluttered office.

“Will the union pay for the lawyer?” I asked her.

“No,” she said, as her cell phone rang. She answered it and talked for a couple of minutes, while I waited patiently, noticing I’d been unconsciously biting my nails – something I couldn’t recall having done in years.

“Will the union pay part of the fee?” I asked, after she finished the call.

“No,” she said, quickly turning away from me to light a PEACE cigarette, then rummaging through a stack of papers with one hand, while punching buttons on her calculator with the other.

*

I’d searched the ends of the earth looking for the Promised Land, but all I’d been chasing was a ghost. The water from the fount of life moved farther from me as I continued walking toward it. The only path that lay before me was one that led farther into darkness. For better or worse, I’d made a decision to take a step on a road from which there was no turning back.

I walked down the path that led into the courthouse in Hachioji, on the outskirts of Tokyo, on the appointed day – 6 June 2000 – representing myself without a lawyer, and I told the judge I was planning to file a countersuit.

The next court session, in July 2000, I went with Asakura to the courthouse and we talked with the judge in his chambers. We said the company had broken off negotiations, and she told him we were preparing to take the company to the Labor Relations Board.

At the next court session, in August 2000, Asakura said the same thing to the judge. He told us to have a document outlining a countersuit ready by the next court session, which was scheduled for September.

*

Shortly after the court date, the union made a weekend excursion to an *onsen* (hot spring) in Yokohama, about a 90-minute drive from the union's office in Tokyo. The excursion consisted of bathing, meals, and drinking, but mostly meetings. About 100 union members from various companies in Tokyo attended. In the meetings, we went over all the issues the ten or so branches of the union were dealing with, and in each meeting, the union's officers told us we had to try to recruit more union members. During the last meeting, on Sunday afternoon, the union officers asked us if we had anything to say.

I raised my hand and told them, "No one in my company wants to join the union because everyone in my company knows I'm being sued for joining the union in the first place." I looked at the union's directors, sitting at a long table at the head of the room. Asakura had her head down, as if she were trying to pretend she wasn't there. "The best way for the union to make itself appealing," I continued, "is to help me come to a resolution in the negotiations and the lawsuit. Then the union can concentrate on getting new members from my company's employees."

Asakura kept her head bowed, though I could see sweat was forming above her upper lip, just as sweat had formed above Ueyama's when, during the negotiation session, he conceded he'd ordered me to take part in fraud. The other directors shuffled papers and cleared their throats. A moment of roaring silence followed. Soon enough, the meeting spontaneously dissolved and the excursion was over. I walked out to the parking lot. Asakura had given me and some other members a ride to the excursion, but there was no sign of her car. I was left to find my way alone to the train station and back to Tokyo.

*

I felt like I had no one to turn to. I was a *gaijin*, an outside person, caught in a fight deep within an exclusivist society. I began to write a letter to my mother, but I ripped it up. Then I put pen to paper again, intending to ask my brother for advice. I ripped that letter up too. I

dialed one of my friends in California, but hung up before he answered. Why bother? None of them could have understood what I was going through, and it would only have been aggravating the already unbearable frustration I felt to attempt to explain how it had happened my company was suing me.

Just exactly how was I to move on with my life, with virtually no money in the bank and the company slandering me, accusing me of criminal activity?

## 50. Vigilante fantasies

At one point, several months after the second lawsuit against the American Club, one of the litigants told me he was going to throw a rock through the window of IBL in order to get a bit of justice, given that the legal process in Japan wasn't working. Sugimoto was still operating IBL and his other businesses scot-free, with no hindrance whatsoever from Japan's "justice" system.

"I'm going to tape a note on the rock with a quote by Sir Isaac Newton," he told me one night on the phone.

"What's that?" I asked. "'What goes up must come down?'"

"No," he told me, laughing, "the quote is 'For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.'"

I have to confess I found his idea appealing, but that fantasy was soon erased, given that Sugimoto would surely trace any physical damage his businesses suffered to me, and I might get arrested and thrown in jail. So I dissuaded the litigant from his plan.

About a year after I'd moved to Tokyo, I started watching a lot of movies after I got a VCR (along with a map of Japan, from 1935) at a secondhand store. As time and litigation progressed, I began renting movies like *Serpico*, *Casualties of War*, *The Insider,* and *Taxi Driver*.

The first three films were all based on true stories of whistleblowers confronting corruption; the last was about a guy who took the law into his own hands and decided to blow away a few *mafiosi* and an armed robber along the way (and was on the verge of blowing away a presidential candidate too).

I had been playing by the rules, going through the legal process, and following the advice of my lawyers and labor unions, but I didn't seem to be getting anywhere. The bullies were alive, well, and thriving, while I was self-medicating, losing sleep, and unable to concentrate.

I had paranoid visions of being run over by a car, knifed in an elevator, pushed out a window, attacked in the park, or drowned in the pool where I swam at the nearby gym. I'd long ago concluded Japan was a

society that blamed the victim and protected the bully. Violence might get me put in jail, but I was thinking it still might be worth it. In some of my dark thoughts in the middle of the night, I considered trying to purchase a gun. I figured there must be someone I could get one from, perhaps through one of the GIs at one of the military bases, or if I started hanging out in one of the bars in Kabukicho and became friends with some of the *yakuza* there, I might find a gun through them. Or it didn't have to be a gun; it could be a knife. I could sneak into Sugimoto's house in the middle of the night and murder him in his sleep. Or ambush him some night, as he exited a snack bar. (I assumed he was still a regular at snack bars.)  I'd take care of Ueyama and USC Limited later.

But, eventually, after playing the scenarios through in my mind the many nights I couldn't get to sleep, I usually wound up going outside for a long walk (worrying as I was doing so about being ambushed), drinking a beer or two, and laying the dark fantasies to rest – for the time being.

After the scenarios played out and I reached a *modus vivendi* with my darker side, I often told myself, *I don't think I'll live long, but I don't care. I've got to do the right thing, even if I die in the process.*

## 51. Awake all night in a living nightmare

In early September 2000, I began making up a document I was planning to give to other directors in the union, outlining how Asakura had misled and misrepresented me in the negotiations. However, I didn't have time to finish it, because, ironically, I had to go to her office for an appointment to make out a document outlining my countersuit against USC Limited – a countersuit I was scheduled to file the next morning.

When I got to her office, she was busy with another union member, Ms. Hanami, the woman I'd made out with at the 1999 *hanami* party. She'd been fired from her company (before she joined the union) and was trying to get the severance pay her company was legally required to pay her. While they were talking, I helped stuff the union's monthly newsletter into envelopes. Then Asakura and I started working on the countersuit document, while Ms. Hanami drank oolong tea.

Asakura asked me about some details I'd already told her about in a previous fax concerning when I'd talked with Fujii about my salary and benefits.

"I sent you that information two or three weeks ago," I said.

"I'm very busy," she said. "And now I'm probably going to be here till midnight because of you. Don't tell me you sent me something two or three weeks ago. I've got a lot on my mind."

When I was reading the document, I told Asakura I wanted her to include the fact that around 8 January 1997, Fujii said I'd get all the social security money back that I'd paid to the Japanese government.

"I'm going by the document you sent me earlier. I'm really pissed off," she told me. Then she asked if I had any record of conversations with Fujii, like a notebook.

"Yes," I said, "but will it good enough in court?"

Asakura ignored my question, instead telling me in exasperation, "You're deceiving the union."

Ms. Hanami looked on, nodding her head in agreement. “You act like a child,” she said.

“You’re selfish,” Asakura said.

“All you think about is how you hurt,” Ms. Hanami said.

“You don’t care about other people,” Asakura added.

All this was happening the night before my court date, when I was scheduled to submit documents on the countersuit. I reminded Asakura that, before negotiations had even begun, I’d told her I didn't care about the money. She ignored me and lit a cigarette that Ms. Hanami offered her. It seemed that all Asakura was thinking about was that 20 percent commission she’d asked me to agree to before we began negotiating with the company.

At one point, Asakura said that it was a waste of time even to work on the countersuit document.

“I’ll go to the courthouse myself if I have to then, and act as my own lawyer,” I said.

"You can't do that," Asakura said, laughing, but betraying nervousness as she laughed – a “*tatemae*” laugh.

*I* can *do that,* I thought*, she just doesn’t want me to. And I’m not deceiving the union; she’s deceiving* me*.*

It was then Ms. Hanami’s turn to fire a round. "You don't like Japan!” she yelled at me. Then she reloaded and continued firing. "You're a typical rude *gaijin*, always picking on Japan. Go back to America!"

Asakura picked up her PEACE cigarette from the ashtray next to the computer and took a drag. Smoke began to cloud my eyes.

I asked Asakura why she was upset at me for telling her I’d sent her a document two or three weeks ago, in which I gave the dates and times I'd had conversations with Fujii and Ueyama about my work conditions, salary, and benefits, and the promises they had made.

"I'm not a toilet," she answered. "I don't have time for you and all your faxes!"

Ms. Hanami nodded her head in agreement.

"You need to make up your mind," Asakura said, vigorously stamping out her cigarette, which had burned down to the butt by that time. "Do you want the union to help you or not?" she said, her voice rising to a higher decibel with each word she uttered. As she spoke, she did something unusual for Japanese: She looked directly at me, just as Konno had done when he'd told me in his office that I'd be on the IBL payroll and wouldn't be paid late anymore. "Do you want the union to help you or not?" she asked.

I wondered what the hell that was supposed to mean. I felt paralyzed. If by "the union" she meant herself, then I did not want her help anymore. I wanted one of the other union directors to represent me, but just as she had, they'd indicated they were only interested in money by asking me, over and over, to recruit new union members at my company, even though I was being sued because of the union's actions in the first place.

Ms. Hanami turned to Asakura and pointed to me. "He's just like a *keieisha*" (a director of a company), she said.

The union was constantly in negotiation with *keieisha*, inevitably a businessman who tried to protect his company at all costs, often lying and cheating every step of the way to do so. I thought what she said ironic, given that Asakura reminded me of a *keieisha* in the way she was trying to manipulate me and evade responsibility. Apparently, she thought that wasn't working and decided to try the *ijime* (bullying) approach.

I remembered when I'd made out with Ms. Hanami at the *hanami* party and thought, *Thank God I didn't have sex with her.*

The "discussions" went on for hours, until I looked out the window and saw the sun had risen. We'd stayed up all night.

I stood up, picked up my bag with my notes and tape recorder inside it, and walked out the door. I regretted that I hadn't turned the tape

recorder on before the fight started, because if I'd recorded the conversation, I would have had a legitimate claim against Asakura and probably could have taken her to court. *Why not make all this a real orgiastic sue fest?* I thought. *Instead of screwing each other, let's all just sue each other!*

I took the train home, then brushed my teeth, showered, shaved, dressed, and took another train to the Hachioji courthouse. I walked in and found the room where the judge had his chambers. Asakura was there, talking to the judge, who asked her for the countersuit document. She told him that she hadn't had time to prepare it. He told us to have it for him by the end of the month.

When I walked out of the judge's chambers, Asakura followed me and asked me to send her all the evidence I had regarding what Fujii and Ueyama had promised. She also told me I had to transcribe the rest of the negotiation sessions we'd had from the tapes I'd made. After that was done, she said, we'd be ready to take the case to the Labor Relations Board.

"Unnh," I mumbled, and gave her an insolent wave of my hand. But I had no intention of having her negotiate for me, much less transcribing even more negotiation sessions for her (which would mean over twice the work I'd done in transcribing two sessions, given that we'd had five more negotiation sessions). I'd already spent over a year of my life banging my head against the wall because of her, and I didn't want to do any more.

Since the first time I'd talked with her, over two years previously, I'd been telling her I wanted a decisive resolution to the problems the company had created, and she'd promised me one – again and again. Before negotiations began, I said that I wanted to go to the press and she replied, "That's OK. We can do that." After negotiations had started, however, I asked her again about going to the press and she said if I went to the press, we'd have to break off negotiations.

*

A few days later, I went to the union's main office in Chiyoda-ku, [1] talked with some of the union's directors, told them I was unhappy with

the way Asakura was handling my case, and said I didn’t want her representing me anymore.

But I was afraid of the union, as well as Asakura, trying to trip me up. Long after I was gone (and I was sure one day I’d leave Japan), the union, Asakura, USC Limited, and the rest of the Japanese in Tokyo would remain, trying to get along with each other in the biggest city on the most densely populated island of its size in the world.

But I was more worried about the company. The company’s directors had already lied about me in court, by stating I was responsible for the fraud. *Wouldn’t they lie about me again?* I thought. I was afraid they would try to trap me into something – to harass me so that I’d do something violent, try to get one of the women employees to accuse me of sexual harassment, try to accuse me of violence, of not performing my duties as an employee, or any other lie they could think of.

I felt like I was going to boil over, more so than my fellow plaintiffs had boiled over in the courthouse in Utsunomiya, when some of them had burst into tears while Sugimoto had been harassing us by withholding the promised pay until I agreed to shut up. But though that was hell, the hell of that lawsuit had only lasted a few months. I had been through over a year of negotiations and litigation with USC Limited – and I had gone through the inferno alone.

[1] One of the 23 wards of Tokyo’s core area.

## 52. A long walk

I sent the union a fax, in which I wrote that since no one in the union was helping me, I was thinking of quitting the union and just going through the legal process myself. Asakura responded almost immediately (very much out of character) with a faxed reply the same day. In it, she stated that if I wanted to do the union "the favor of quitting" because they wouldn't pay for a lawyer, or if I lost the lawsuit, that was "just fine."

After night had fallen, I went out and started drinking, trying to forget everything, starting with a couple beers at an *izakaya* near Mori Park.

After leaving the restaurant, I walked past the Japanese Self-Defense Forces Air Force Base, across the street from the park, then through the park, with an Asahi beer in my hand that I'd bought from a beer vending machine in my neighborhood. I wondered how much more punishment I could take. Two years earlier, I would have been jogging through the park, seeing if I could hold up for 45 minutes, or swimming laps in the pool in the gymnasium, a stone's throw away. High school kids were riding bicycles through the park. Girls in their US Navy-like blouses were standing on the pegs that jutted out from the back wheels of the bikes, wearing their brown loafers, oversized white sweat socks up close to their knees, their blue skirts and long black hair dancing behind them in the light breeze as they gripped the shoulders of their boyfriends, who pedaled. I walked through the clearing, where my plant had been, next to the pond, then across a small bridge to where a collection of homeless men congregated, drinking oolong tea and *nihonshu*. I sat down on a bench nearby, looking at the few stars in the sky. I don't know how long I stayed there, but it was for a long time, long after I'd drained my beer. Then I set out again, on a journey whose destination I wasn't sure of.

I walked toward the fountain in the middle of the park, near the bathrooms, and saw two figures on a bench, grunting and groaning. Coming closer to them, I saw they were making love. A young woman who looked about 18 or 19, not much older than the high school girls I'd seen earlier, had her miniskirt pulled up behind her but covering her upper thighs in front, her back to her boyfriend, sitting on top of him and taking him in. Her white panties, with what looked like pictures of an *anime* character all over them, hung from her left ankle, off a high-

heeled boot. She had short-cropped, dark-brown hair. Her boyfriend's hair was long, black, and dyed orange in the bangs. He held her hips and I saw a tattoo that looked like a small dragon on his left forearm. Their eyes avoided mine as they went about their business, and I went about mine, walking past them out to the *sakura* farther down the path.

Later, I went back home, grabbed a few ads for prostitution services in my mailbox, and took the train to Kabukicho in Shinjuku – the biggest red light district in Tokyo – where I searched for the woman of my dreams. It didn't take long to realize love was out of reach for me, but I continued the quest nevertheless.

I walked through an alley, through Japanese *noren* curtains that hung halfway to the floor, with a picture of a seemingly innocent young woman with big bright eyes on them, down a narrow passageway, then down a flight of stairs. Porno videos played on TVs attached to the walls. Women appeared in various incarnations of cosplay [1]: Office Lady. Waitress. Girl next door. Housewife. I studied them as they came out of doors, one by one, while I drank from a glass of *nihonshu* I'd bought from a vending machine outside. Miniskirt. Bikini. Wedding Dress. Masochist. Dominatrix. Schoolgirl in (US Navy) uniform greeting me, "Hello," bowing, then lifting her skirt, as she lifted her head from the bow, exposing her white panties for me to see. I wanted one of the women; I wanted all of them. I didn't want any of them. I wanted to live; I wanted to die. I wanted to drown in the spells they'd put on me.

*

She had small hands with painted fingernails, and big red lips. Her soft black hair fell in her eyes and tickled my stomach. She brushed it away with her left hand as she worked on me more deeply. She coughed, her right hand gripping me lightly at the base. I looked down, entranced by her cleavage.

And then, after about a half hour, "Let me give you a tip," I said, and though tipping is unheard of in Japan, she meekly accepted it. A wry smile on her face and a bow and a "*ja ne*" as she uttered a sigh, telling me "goodbye," shrugging her shoulders and tilting her head slightly to one side.

“*Wasuremono nai desu ka*?” she said in a gentle, almost pleading tone, asking me to make sure I didn’t forget anything before I walked out the door. And as soon as I left, I wanted to go back to her again – but I didn’t have the yen for it.

*

Then I stepped out onto the street and went through another door, and still others. Looking for Heaven. Looking for Hades, but actually just passing through purgatory while traveling the River Styx. Looking for my way home and getting lost – for there is no home for the *gaijin* in Japan.

I returned to my apartment. On the train, I smelled the sex and alcohol emanating from the pores of my body, in the droplets of sweat that ran down my face, chest, and back. There were only a few others on the train, and we all sat by ourselves, with a lot of space between each other. No one noticed the *gaijin,* nor, for that matter, paid attention to their other fellow Japanese passengers. Japan is a good place to be alone.

[1] Anglicization of the Japanese word “*kosupure*,” which means to dress up in the outfit of a character from a film (often *anime*), book, or *manga*.

## 53. Lawyers and more lawyers . . . *gaman suru*

The union considered my request to have someone other than Asakura represent me, but later told me that since Asakura had represented me from the beginning and knew how complicated all that had transpired in negotiations was, there was really no option except for her to continue representing me.

After our all-night session, when Asakura had turned against me, I began recording phone conversations I had with her. In one of them, she said if I didn't have evidence to back up my claim that the company owed me money, I'd be guilty of a crime.

I began consulting with various lawyers to see about someone representing me, eventually talking to seven. In the course of these consultations, I met with a woman lawyer and played some of the tapes for her that I'd made of Asakura. She said Asakura was harassing me, hoping I'd quit the union. The lawyer also said, despite what Asakura had told me, I wouldn't be guilty of a crime if I didn't have evidence to back up a claim in court.

"She's lying to me?" I asked.

"Yes," the lawyer answered.

*

I had to take several days off work in order to consult with the lawyers, creating a financial burden. The consultations cost ¥5,000 (about $40 at the time) for a half hour, and because I was losing time at work, I was losing more money.

There were more nights without sleep. I had dreams I was slipping down a pit. When I'd looked for Hades and traveled through it on my own will, I'd always found my way out. When I had these dreams now, though, the harder I tried to escape it, the deeper I slipped into a wasteland. Hadn't I, since the day I was born, reached for something higher, something that transcended what it was I was experiencing? But after all that reaching, I found myself in Japan, being sued by the company I was working for.

When I wasn't visiting Hades or slipping into a wasteland, I was staying up all night working on the lawsuit, writing documents in Japanese or translating documents for the union or lawyers.

I often couldn't get to sleep and would go for long walks in Mori Park. Returning home, I still couldn't get to sleep, so I'd go buy beer at one of the convenience stores in my neighborhood, go back to my apartment, and drink it in the dark.

After finishing the beer, I still couldn't get to sleep at times, but it didn't matter because by then it would be daylight, so I'd get ready for work. But when I'd arrive at the office, I wasn't given any work to do. Apparently, the company (and some of the people in the union as well) were hoping that because I was sitting at my desk with nothing to do, I'd go nuts and jump in front of a train, as many a *sarariman* (male office worker) in Japan has done. I was assigned the role of a *mado giwa*, which means a "window decoration" in English, a person in a Japanese company who's been ostracized and sits quietly at his desk doing nothing, as if he is a piece of decoration in front of a window.

## 54. Another long walk

One mid-October night in 2000, I went for a walk, as I did nearly every night, but this walk turned out to be longer than usual. I went through the park, down by the horse race track, outside the walls of the prison. I went to the alley where a collection of *sunakku* are located in Higashi Fuchu, near my apartment, where there is a vending machine that sells beer and *nihonshu*, next to a vending machine that sells porno magazines, porno videos and sex toys. I decided to invest in a beer, a small bottle of *nihonshu,* a porno magazine, and a porno video. As I carried my investments in my hands, a pretty woman, who looked to be in her mid-thirties (a few years younger than me at the time), walked out of a bar. *Karaoke* music and an off-tune middle-aged Japanese man's voice escaped from the door, gradually disappearing as the door slowly closed and the pretty woman exited, looking at me. I thought she looked at me longer than she should have, but this wasn't unusual, as I'd been stared at nearly every day in Japan. I gave her a perfunctory nod, somewhat ashamed to be carrying the collection of vices I had in my arms when she was perhaps the answer to all my desires that evening. But I knew she was out of reach, and even if she were available to me, I wouldn't have been able to afford the time, energy or money I would have needed to invest in order to meet her in a neutral place we might have been able to satisfy our lusts. And I would have had to talk with her about what I was going through with my company – and she never would have understood, as I was a *gaijin*.

She turned and walked away down the alley in front of me. My apartment was in the same direction she was walking. I walked behind her at a slow pace, trying to make sure that she wouldn't think I was trailing her on purpose. She turned around once and looked over her shoulder to spy on me; then, in a moment, she was gone, turning left on the main street that ran perpendicular to the alley. I took a few more steps and heard murmurs – ghost-like, I thought – but a second later, I saw the sounds came from two cats in front of me, making love.

The next night, the first really cold night of the season, I couldn't get to sleep and began watching the porno video, but it just made me more frustrated. I picked up my VCR and threw it as hard as I could against the wall, breaking the machine beyond repair. "I hate this life!" I screamed, but no one heard. Those who might have cared were all sleeping somewhere outside the window, in the cold.

I woke up the next morning and got ready to go to work – to do nothing, because the company that was suing me wasn’t giving me any work to do. I began to punch holes in the walls of my apartment, and I only stopped when I realized that, at some point in the future, I’d have to pay for the damage I was doing.

Because they gave me absolutely nothing to do at work, I sat at my desk and read books, including the King James Version of the Bible: the New Testament three times and a third of the way through the Old Testament. I thought of other ways to keep my mind occupied and spent several weeks reviewing Spanish and Japanese vocabulary. Then, I wrote my thoughts down and continued to write and write and write to try to keep from going insane, filling up several notebooks in the process.

There was a drugstore across the street from the apartment building I was living in, and one day, when I had a cough, I bought some over-the-counter medicine. Reading the label, I found there was codeine in it. I began to stock up on cough medicine and pop codeine pills regularly, chasing them down with the codeine cough syrup. They mellowed me out and made me feel calm. On some especially bad days, I took as many as six or nine or more codeine pills (the prescribed dosage was three) at work, so I wouldn't get violent and murder someone.

*

After a long search, I finally found a lawyer who charged me only a nominal fee. He asked me to have the union go to the Labor Relations Board, as the union had already threatened the company it would do several times. “Going to the Labor Relations Board is a very simple process,” the lawyer told me in Japanese. “All one has to do is fill out blanks on a single piece of paper and submit it, whereupon the Labor Relations Board contacts the company and summons them to a meeting.”

Nevertheless, Asakura had never filled out and submitted that sheet of paper.

*

The judge in the Hachioji courthouse had decided to have my case moved to the biggest courthouse in Japan, to the Kasumigaseki district, in central Tokyo – the district where the Japanese government's offices are located. My lawyer and I went there and filed a countersuit in January 2001. The judge who presided was an attractive woman who looked about my age.

Though the union had promised they'd send a representative to show support for me in court, there was no one from the union to be seen. The union had abandoned me.

## 55. Resolution amidst mass murder

I didn't trust anyone – not a single soul – and I began to tape nearly every telephone conversation I had, along with taping conversations at work. In over a year of the lawsuit and my countersuit, and over two years of union negotiations, I accumulated more than 50 hours of tapes.

When the company sued me, they claimed that when I'd been ordered to sign someone's name to a document it was not, in fact, forgery; that they had permission from the person whose name had been signed. I began a search for this mysterious gentleman, who was president of his company, and finally found the phone number for his company's head office in Belgium. I called an operator at KDD (the international phone company in Japan) late one night and was put through to the mysterious gentleman's office. Recording the conversation, I asked him if indeed the company had permission to sign his name to documents. "No," he said. "Your company has never had permission to sign my name."

The conversation continued amicably in English for a couple more minutes. When it ended, I transcribed it from the tape I'd made and translated it into Japanese. Then I gave my lawyer a copy of the tape of the conversation, the transcription, and the translation, which he, in turn, submitted to the court.

*

In July 2001, the judge suggested I resign from the company and the company provide me with a good chunk of severance pay and compensation. Then, as the judge requested, during the court session in late August 2001, my lawyer and I made a proposal for monies to be paid me. My lawyer made the same monetary proposal the union had made (the proposal for which I was being sued). Later, in early September, my lawyer called me up and told me to look in the mail for a letter that was to arrive regarding the settling of the lawsuit.

*

Diary entry, 30 August 2001

“I just flushed all my codeine down the toilet. I don’t want to become a junkie . . . I don’t have a lot of money – about $5,000 – but it’s enough to start over somewhere. I’m going to leave Japan – go somewhere, anywhere . . . I rewrote my resume and put the address for my post office box in Oakland on it. Shit. Oakland. That’s the place I left to go to Japan!”

*

I went home from work one night and started to pack my bags for America, not caring what happened in the end. I didn’t have much savings, but I figured if worse came to worst, I could live outside, homeless. Los Angeles or San Diego would be good places, I thought; at least they were warm in the winter. As I was packing, I went through all the papers I’d kept over the years. I found an envelope, yellow and dusty with age, though I didn’t know how old it was. I opened it and found the skeleton key from the secret stairway in the big house I’d lived in back in Grand Rapids. I held it in my hand, turned out the light, and stretched out on my *futon*, caressing the skeleton key with my fingers. I contemplated all the other fingers that must have touched it, where the lives of the people who possessed those fingers might have led, and where my life had taken me since I’d found the skeleton key 35 years before.

I couldn't sleep. But it wasn't because of stress; rather, it was the absence of stress that kept me awake. I lay in bed for over an hour. Then, giving up on sleep, I walked to the window and gazed out from it as cars sped past. I considered what it must have been like for my father’s best friend, as he burned with an indescribable passion for what had spiraled out of control, while he jumped out of the window into the cold, swinging off the pendulum of life, running headlong to the other side of its border. *Could it be that, in death, he might have found the love and respect that we, the living, spend our whole lives searching for?* I asked myself, as I looked at the stars in the sky.

My gaze shifted to the top of the TV, where sat the large green crystal that Lloyd, my Rolfer, had given me.

I rubbed the crystal and thought of Lloyd, my friend Marla, who’d died of AIDS in New York, my friend Tom, who’d died in a car accident in Kalamazoo, Fujii, doing time in the bowels of Shit River with a *tatemae*

smile on his face. I thought that, from the vantage point of their perspective, they would have been happy with the way I'd lived my life. But I was cognizant of the fact that I'd never really know, until I'd joined them in the afterlife. I looked at the light coming from the sky and felt like I could have ridden a moonbeam up to the secret stairway and into space – floating out to eternity as my partner had from the flight deck of the *USS Coral Sea*.

Then I turned on the TV, to find that the World Trade Center in New York City had been attacked by *kamikaze*s. With the rest of the world, I witnessed people falling to their deaths from the windows they jumped from. That night turned out to be another one without sleep. I thought of how insignificant my problems now seemed, as I watched TV, prayed, wept, and drank Asahi in the dark.

At work the next day, people looked at me differently but didn't say anything. I asked Hirano if he wanted to go to lunch, but he had to leave on a business trip.

*

I opened my mailbox that night and found the letter my lawyer had told me to expect, buried under porno and prostitution advertisements. I opened it, to find the company had accepted the proposal my lawyer had made for severance pay. I was awarded 5 million yen (about $40,000) by the court – the amount I was sued over and that the union had proposed for a settlement. The company also apologized for ordering me to take part in fraud against my will.

I had won.

*

George never did get back to me about what Ueyama had to say about the negotiations, and I never saw or heard from him or Hirano or again.

*

A few weeks later, after I'd tied up my affairs in Japan, I boarded a train for Narita Airport. I began to open my mouth to tell Japan "goodbye," but the word stuck in my throat and was swallowed up like a bitter pill.

Japan and I would never part; we had been bound and married to each other for all time. I looked out the window for something – something I could not then and cannot now articulate. It was a clear day, but what I searched for eluded me because the tears in my eyes blurred my vision as the plane took off.

And, in due time, I stepped on a stone in the sea of life that led me to another shore, as I moved forward onto the road of my future, lit by the heroes and villains of my past.

*  *  *

**THE END**

## Postscript: Return to Japan

Seven years later, I made a trip back to Japan, for three weeks, paid for by a Japanese girlfriend I'd been living with for a little over a year in New York City. I saw my old girlfriend, Ms. Shinto, who showed me pictures of the two children – a boy, age 13, and a girl, age 11 – that she'd conceived with her husband. I also walked by the American Club in Oyama, with its logo still on the mailbox, though it had ceased holding classes 12 years earlier. I looked for the International Business and Language Junior College in Utsunomiya, but it had disappeared. The building had been torn down, and a housing project stood where it once did. It was as if it had never existed. But, all in all, Japan hadn't changed much.

I went to the building where USC's head offices were located in Tokyo. By chance, I saw Ueyama, waiting in line to buy a cup of coffee, as I sipped an espresso with a dab of milk at a corner table, my girlfriend by my side. I opened the *Japan Times* to find that NOVA, the largest English school in Japan, had gone bankrupt – the biggest bankruptcy in postwar Japanese history.

Later, I went to Mori Park near my old apartment, once again going to the clearing where I'd put my plant, which had disappeared in 2000. From the clearing, I saw housewives walking their children through the park and dogs chasing each other as the sun set on Japan.

## Glossary of Japanese Words

*Anata*: Translated as “you,” but as with many words in Japanese, it is situational. There are many other words for “you” in Japanese as well. Often, in conversation, the word “you” is omitted because it might be construed as too aggressive by the person it is directed toward.

*Bousozoku*: Motorcycle gangs in Japan, mostly made up of teenagers and people in their 20s. They are probably best known for riding in groups, revving up their engines to as high a volume as possible, and roaring through city streets in the middle of the night.

*Bunsho*: A document or a piece of writing.

*Burakumin*: Historically, members of the lowest class of Japanese society. They are still often discriminated against today. The term *burakumin* is not uttered in public by Japanese, but is used in private conversation. *Burakumin,* in recent decades, have collectively sought to redress historical wrongs committed against them and monitor acts of discrimination. Some of their methods in doing so have been controversial. Nevertheless, it is generally acknowledged among the Japanese of today that these people have been treated unfairly.

*Bushi*: Historically the Japanese *samurai*/warriors.

*Daimyo*: Feudal lord.

*Echi*: Sexually energetic/voracious, also used to describe the act(s) of sexual intercourse.

*Gaijin*: Literally “outside person.” Most commonly used term used for “foreigner” in Japanese, but usually used in reference to Caucasian foreigners. It is often considered pejorative by some foreigners in Japan, but usually not acknowledged as such by Japanese. In polite conversation and in news reports, etc., the term *gaikokujin* is usually used instead.

*Gaikokujin*: Literally “foreign country person.” A polite term for “foreigner.”

*Gaman suru*: Enduring something that is seemingly unendurable, with dignity and patience.

*Giri*: Usually translated as “duty,” often contrasted with *ninjo*.

*Hai*: Yes.

*Habatsu*: Group or clique of people. Usually used in terms of politics or business.

*Hanami*: Literally “flower viewing.” The time in early spring that people gather in parks to socialize, drink alcohol, sing, and gaze at the *sakura* – cherry blossoms in bloom.

*Hanko*: A rubber stamp, used in lieu of a signature when acknowledging or approving the contents of a document. Used in companies and government offices, banks, etc., but also used by individuals to acknowledge receipt of a registered letter, payment, etc.

*Hiragana*: One of the three writing systems in the Japanese language. *Hiragana* consists of 50 characters. The other two writing systems are *kanji* and *katakana*. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are phonetic.

*Honn*e: One’s true intentions/feelings, as opposed to *tatemae*.

*Ijime*: Bullying, both physical and psychological. *Ijime* is endemic throughout Japanese society, but often not discerned by foreign observers of Japan.

*Ikan*/*Ikenai*: “Inexcusable” for someone to do something or have done something. *Ikenai* would be slightly less strong than saying *ikan*. Usually, these words would be uttered by a *senpai* to a *kouhai*. These words are derived from the word *iku*.

*Iku*: A verb meaning “to go.” (But it also is used to mean “achieve orgasm,” like the English use of “come” in an orgasmic context.)

*Izakaya*: A pub, where alcohol, along with snacks, many of them cooked in front of the patron, are served.

*Juku*: A cram school, usually to prepare students for university entrance exams.

*Kabuki*: A traditional type of performance in Japan that follows a plot, with highly stylized singing and dancing included. A Westerner might consider it similar to opera.

*Kamikaze*: Literally “God-Wind” The two *kanji* characters are “god” (“*kami*” □) and “wind” (“*kaze*” □). The English translation is usually “divine wind.” The word is usually used in reference to the Japanese pilots who went on suicide missions, attacking Allied ships toward the end of World War II. The Japanese initially used the word to denote the wind/typhoon that destroyed the Mongols (and Chinese and Koreans) under Hubilie (aka “Kublai Khan”), who came from China and attempted to invade Japan in the 13th century. The invasion was not successful, and it would not be until 1945 that a foreign country occupied Japan.

*Kana*: The two phonetic types of written characters in the Japanese language (*hiragana* and *katakana*).

*Kanji*: The Chinese characters that have been incorporated into Japan’s writing system. One of the three alphabets in the Japanese written language (the other two being *hiragana* and *katakana*.) There are 1,945 *kanji* officially recognized by the Japanese Ministry of Education that Japanese students are expected to master at least by the time they graduate from high school.

*Katana*: The standard, long sword, often called a “*samurai* sword” in English. It has a standard length of a minimum 60 centimeters (about 23 1/2 inches).

*Katakana*: One of the three writing systems in the Japanese written language. The other two are *hiragana* and *kanji*. Katakana are mainly used in translations of foreign words, but are also often used in advertisements (apparently because they tend to appear more striking in writing.) *Hiragana* and *katakana* (also called collectively “*kana*”) are phonetic.

*Keieisha*: Businessman/men (there are few businesswomen in Japan), specifically businessmen who are responsible for a company's operations; directors of a company.

*Kempeitai*: The military police/spy organization in Japan from 1881 up until Japan's surrender in September 1945. Westerners might be inclined to equate it to the German *Gestapo* during World War II.

*Ken*: Prefecture. A governmental jurisdiction, similar to a state in the US, or province or department in many other countries.

*Kiyomizu Dera*: A Buddhist temple in Kyoto. There is a small pool there where people can write wishes on a piece of paper, toss them into the pool, and watch the paper dissolve.

*Kouhai*: One's immediate subordinate in the hierarchical order of a Japanese organization (company, school, team, etc.).

*Konyaku*: A formal engagement ceremony between a couple who plan to wed; it takes place with their families.

*Koumin*: Craftsmen. Historically, the third lowest social class in Japan.

*Kouzoku*: Historically, the highest class in Japan. Royalty.

*Kusai mono ni ha futa o shiro*: Japanese proverb, literally translated as "If it stinks, put a lid on it." The idea is that if something is unpleasant or shameful, you should hide it, in order to make the appearance of cleanliness/morally upstanding behavior. Closely associated with the concept of *tatemae*.

*Machigau*/*Machigaeru*: To make a mistake; to err.

*Mado giwa*: An idiom that means a person who is "decoration," like something next to a window would be. ("*Mado*" means window; "*giwa*" means "side" or "edge.") A person in Japanese companies who has been ostracized is given no work to do, and sometimes is directed to do nothing but sit at his/her desk and stare straight ahead. It is a form of *ijime,* designed to break a person and force him/her to quit voluntarily.

(It is technically difficult for a Japanese company to legally fire a regular, full-time employee.)

*Mizu Shoubai*: Literally the “water trade.” This includes the nightlife businesses of snack bars, massage parlors, etc.

*Moshi moshi*: “Hello” (when answering a telephone).

*Nihonshu*: Japanese rice wine (called *sake* in English, though *sake* actually means “alcohol” in Japanese), with an alcohol content slightly higher than wine made from grapes.

*Ninjo*: One’s own, individual desires, often contrasted with *giri*.

*Noren*: Curtains that serve as dividers between one room and another or are displayed at the entrance of a business establishment. Usually, they have vertical slits, allowing for easy access to the room on the other side. They are usually decorated with pictures, written *kanji* or *kana* characters or designs.

*Noumin*: Farmers. Historically, the third highest social class in Japan.

*Omiyage*: A souvenir. Usually bought for someone else by a person who makes a trip.

*Onnagata*: Male actors who play female roles in the traditional *kabuki* plays in Japan. (Only males perform in kabuki plays.)

*Onsen*: Hot spring bath, very numerous and popular in Japan. There are often restaurants serving alcohol, and sometimes hotels within the *onsen* complex. *Onsen* bathing is considered good for one’s health.

*Sakura*: Cherry tree or cherry blossom. Sakura are in bloom for a very short time in early spring in Japan. In Japanese history, many *bushi* were buried next to *sakura* trees, and some people committed suicide next to *sakura* trees. There is a notion of the ephemeral – beauty and death – associated with *sakura*.

*Sake*: Any kind of alcohol, though “*sake,*” in English (pronounced differently from the Japanese), means *nihonshu*.

*Samurai*: Historically, the second highest social class of people in Japan. *Bushi*.

*San*: An honorific term, similar to the English “Mr.” or “Ms.” but used much more often in Japanese than “Mr.” or “Ms.” would be used in English. Japanese will address nearly everyone outside of family members with *“san*” or the title of their occupation or hierarchical rank.

*Senbei*: Rice crackers. Generally better tasting and healthier than any American variety.

*Senpai*: One’s immediate superior in the hierarchical order of a Japanese organization (company, school, team, etc.).

*Sensei*: One’s teacher or mentor. *Sensei* is also the honorific term used to address a doctor or lawyer, instead of the honorific “*san*.”

*Shachou*: President of a company.

*Shinkansen*: Usually called the “bullet train” in English. The high-speed trains in Japan that run on several lines throughout the main island of Honshu, and as of this writing, on one line in Kyushu – the second most populous island of Japan, to the southwest of Honshu. The first *shinkansen* line was completed shortly before the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

*Shitsurei shimasu*: Excuse me. Also used by a person just before s/he departs from others or when saying “goodbye” on the telephone.

*Shounin*: Merchants. Historically, the second lowest class in Japan.

*Sukebe*: Sexually energetic/voracious. This word is usually used in a negative connotation. *Echi* is a word that is more common and sexually dignified.

*Sunakku*: A bar where extremely high-priced drinks are served along with snacks, and where women work – pouring drinks for, singing with, and generally pleasing the male customers. (The customers are always male.) The word *sunakku* comes from “snack,” but as you can glean from my definition, there has been a great deal lost in the translation. Women who work in snack bars are almost always respectable, and there is not much discrimination against them. However, there is some.

Some of the women might (but most of them will not) negotiate sexual services with customers.

*Tatami*: Straw matting used as flooring in many Japanese homes and restaurants. Pieces of *tatami* are made in sizes of approximately six feet long by three feet wide (approximately one meter by two meters).

*Tatemae*: One's stated intentions/feelings, as opposed to *honne*.

*Yakuza*: Japanese "*mafia*."

*Yamato*: Another name for Japan or Japanese or Japaneseness. It is also a Japanese surname. It was also the name of the largest battleship in the world, launched by Japan. Alas, *Yamato*, and much of the symbolism associated with it, was sunk during the Battle of Okinawa in World War II. Much of the symbolism associated with it, however, has been revived, just as the *sakura* come back to life every year – blooming with the spirit of the dead that are buried underneath them.

## About the author

Don MacLaren's articles, commentary, stories, poems and letters to editors have appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek* (International), *Business Week* (International), the *Japan Times*, *Japan Today*, the *Tenderloin Times*, the *Daily Californian*, *Danse Macabre*, *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Wilderness House Literary Review* and other publications.

MacLaren lived in Detroit and Grand Rapids, Michigan until he was 19. His wanderlust and desire for a better life than the bleak future facing him in the U.S. Midwest led him to quit his job as a press operator in a factory and join the US Navy. In the Navy, he worked as a Radioman, holding a Top Secret security clearance. His ship, the *USS Coral Sea*, made two seven-month long deployments to East Asia and the Indian Ocean/Gulf of Oman during the Iran hostage crisis and Iran-Iraq War. In 1980, he and his shipmates on the *Coral Sea* spent 102 consecutive days at sea without visiting a port, most of that time off the coast of Iran. During this time, the *Coral Sea* and ships in company participated in Operation Eagle Claw, an attempt to rescue Americans being held hostage in Tehran.

The Navy requested that MacLaren re-enlist, but he chose to leave the service when he completed his contract.

In 1988, he graduated as valedictorian at the City College of San Francisco, with an AS in Film Production. In 1990, he completed coursework for a BA in English from UC Berkeley, where he was a member of the Honor Students' Society.

In March 1991, he moved to Japan, where he initially taught English at a school called the American Club. In 1995, he began work in Tokyo at a trading company, USC Limited, as a writer and translator. During his time of employment, USC Limited imported products from companies such as Unocal, Prestone, and Con-Agra and marketed them to clients such as Toyota, Nissan, and the Japanese government. MacLaren participated in negotiations with these suppliers and clients, working as an interpreter.

In 2001, he resigned his position at USC Limited and after an 18-day trip through Europe, he returned to the United States. He spent most of 2001 to 2010 in New York City, where he worked as a teacher, freelance

writer, and translator. His students and clients consisted of people from over 75 different countries.

In 2003-04, he spent six months traveling in Latin America, where he freelanced as a writer and translator.

Between 2008 and 2014, he made numerous trips to Japan, totaling over six months. Much of this time was spent writing his observations on Japan, as well as doing freelance translating and tutoring.

In addition to the jobs mentioned above, MacLaren worked as a cab driver in Oakland, butcher in Michigan, construction worker and bartender in Japan, janitor and hotel desk clerk in San Francisco, security guard in Dallas, counterperson at Caffe Trieste in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood, wire operator/bookkeeper/trading assistant for the institutional trading desk at the stock brokerage firm Merrill Lynch in Dallas, and other jobs.

MacLaren lived in Jiangsu Province, China from 2010 to 2014, where he taught in high schools. He has divided his time between New York City, China, and Japan since July 2014. He currently works as a teacher, writer, and translator.